



3

—シーキューブ—
Cube×Curse×Curious

水瀬葉月

Illustration さよりがため

C³・シーキューブ-II

宅配便で届いた謎の黒い箱と、その夜に現れた煎餅泥棒少女(全裸)・フィアにまつわる騒動が終わってほっと一息。ようやく平穏な日常が訪れた……かと思いきや、そこに新たな宅配便が!? イヤな予感がしつつも箱を開けると、案の定、真新しい女子制服が入っていて……!

かくして春亮と同じ高校に編入することになったフィア。もちろん一筋縄でいくはずもなく、初登校日にはドジっ娘な美少女が現れて、さらなる大騒動が巻き起こる!?

水瀬葉月&さそりがために贈る第2巻登場!





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みなせ はづき
水瀬葉月

写真は工作中的の作者。「パンツは……はいているべきか否か……？」などという真面目な問題の数々を、こんな四角四面な顔で考えているのです。ちなみにこれは電撃写真部の藤原祐さん撮影。撮ってもらうために某所にわざわざノートと立方体を持ち込みました。

【電撃文庫作品】

結界師のフーガ

結界師のフーガ2 龍骸の楽園

結界師のフーガ3 見えない棘の家族

ぼくと魔女式アポカリプス

ぼくと魔女式アポカリプス2 Cradle Elves Type

ぼくと魔女式アポカリプス3 Nightmare Crimson Form

C³-シーキューブ

C³-シーキューブ-II

イラスト: さそりがため

千葉県出身の限り無くO型に近い性格のA型。装備品はDSとPSP。

今回も女の子達に萌え狂いながら描かせていただきました！

カバー／晩印刷

3 —シーキューブ— CubexCursedxCurious II



水瀬葉月

Illustration ちよひなため



「なんど……ん、
なんど……んを
ゆめさ」

さくらおしり しら E
桜参白穂

サヴェレンティの所有者
だった少女。サヴェ
レンティが白穂と袂を
分かった理由とは？

「人間は嫌い。
もう人間の話など聞かないし
人間の指図は受けない」

サヴェレンティ
呪いを受け人化した人
形。一体どのような作
用により呪われるに
至ったのか……？

Scene02:人形と人間

むら まさ
村正このは
フィアと同じ事情で春
亮と同居中。
誘惑ボディな眼鏡っ娘。

フィア
＜ある事情＞から、夜
知家に身を寄せる少女。
お煎餅大好き！

「は、春亮くん!?
いったいナニをしようとして
たんですかっ!?!」

や ち はろ あき
夜知春亮
フィアやこのはを預か
る立場な少年。
じじむさく枯れた少年
だったが……!?

「いたた……!」



Scene03:二人だけの縁側

「どうしたフィア、
腹でも痛いのかー。
それはきつと喰い散らかされた
煎餅の反撃だな」

「私は……役立たずだなあ……」



「おお、伸びるモチの形態模写。やるな」



「いや、いやにするー！ あらおー！」



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Designed by Toru Suzuki



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Illustration さそりがため

Prologue

Swallowing hard, Yachi Haruaki opened the cardboard box sitting on the living room table.

"..."

After a few seconds of silence, he closed it up and left it untouched. The contents were exactly as imagined. More than simply forcing his hand, this was giving him a total headache. Pressing his finger against his brow, Haruaki groaned softly:

"Seriously... Should I praise him for being fully prepared beforehand or what... I don't even need to read my horoscope, this week's unlucky item is decidedly the home delivery. Why do I keep getting sent these troublesome things?"

"Hmm... What's that about a home delivery?"

"Wah!"

A face poked out from beneath the table. A girl with long silver hair... Or more accurately, she was one of the "troublesome home deliveries" Haruaki was thinking of right now.

This girl—Fear—had come to his home for the purpose of lifting her curse. No sooner had she arrived, various things happened over the past few days. The series of incidents had come to a close mere hours earlier. Lying down as she stared blankly at the television, Fear must have been tired and fallen asleep at some point. However—

"Y-You woke up?"

"You're poking around noisily on the side, how could I not wake up... Also just now the doorbell rang. Did someone deliver a package?"

"Uh, hmm... That..."

Seeing Haruaki act suspiciously, Fear narrowed her sleepy eyes and said:

"You've been acting strange since just now. Are you trying to hide something from me?"

"No, nothing of that sort!"

"What a fake smile... Certainly suspicious. You were also reading a letter secretly earlier, and now you have this box. What's inside? Show me!"

"Ooh..."

It must have been a delusion, but the letter in his pocket suddenly felt heavier. Haruaki had no intention of hiding it—but he did feel slightly hesitant. Was it really okay?

"Take it out!"

Fear extended her upper torso forward over the table. Her pretty eyebrows slightly raised, those beautiful eyes of hers stared straight at Haruaki, reproaching him for his secrecy. As her silky fine silver hair slid down, it naturally tickled the back of Haruaki's hand that was pressed against the box top.

"Come on, come clean with it! By this point, I forbid you to hide anything from me! By this point, I must discover your secret. Or else I won't be able to sleep tonight!"

"Hiding something eh... How should I put it, there are certain things that I need mental preparation for... Besides, it is well within my rights to keep a secret or two, Fear-san!"

Haruaki answered as if trying to defy destiny. Fear's eyes displayed wavering for an instant then she lowered her gaze and spoke softly:

"Mmm... I guess. But... This is so unfair! I have nothing hidden from you anymore, you know everything now! That's right, you've even seen that embarrassing appearance..."

Like I said, please stop using that kind of misleading description, okay? Reflexively, Haruaki was about to object but swallowed his words when he saw Fear's slightly blushing face. Both human and not human, she was a bringer of

trouble who was both ignorant and willful, with a bottomless appetite for rice crackers... Nevertheless, the skin, hair, scent and breath displayed before Haruaki's eyes undoubted belonged to a real girl.

"So—"

As his gaze was drawn to Fear's body, somehow the surrounding noise began to sound quite distant. The laughter from the television. Ticking away, the clock's hands sounded like they were moving at snail's pace. Outside the living room, the sound of the other housemate entering the bath could be heard from the changing area.

Those glimmering watery eyes pressed near.

Gulp—Feeling the breath before him, Haruaki swallowed a mouthful of saliva.

"So! Come on, just open that up for me to see! Be more open and upfront! Damn it, no other way, I promise you! No matter what is inside I won't be surprised. They said on television that without exception, each and every man has secretly bought an erotic product by mail order at least once!"

"What are you misunderstanding this time? Besides, stop watching those television programmes that teaches misleading information!"

Reversing the mood, Haruaki retorted against Fear who was pressing the issue forcefully... But as soon as he spoke, he lost his vigor.

(...Whatever, it's not like I can delay this indefinitely. No other way.)

Haruaki made his decision and took out from his pocket the letter with the enclosed document.

"Fine, I got it. Next, I will inform you of something important."

"Finally, you decided to come clean. Good, I will listen to you."

"First of all, you must memorize this line from now on—"I am completely unrelated to that film director."

"Huh?"

Fear inclined her head in puzzlement. Haruaki handed the document over as if saying "You'll understand once you read this."

"What what... Fear 'Cubrick'...?"^[1]

"Perhaps you may object, but your name has already been decided beforehand. Honestly, Pops' naming sense is really terrible... He's probably gloating over his clever pun? But I don't think the spelling's entirely correct."

Fear seemed rather surprised and kept blinking her eyes.

"Name? As in family name? Mine?"

"Yeah. I think people are going to keep asking you about it, so the line I quoted will be your answer. Remember it carefully. As for why you need a family name... The answer is written down there."

"Uh... Authorization of the above-named student's enrollment — enrollment? Enrollment means going to school, right? Is it the school I went last time where you and Kirika go to!?"

"Uwah, stop spraying me with saliva! Anyway, that's pretty much it. Frankly speaking, I think this is a bit too soon, but the prospects of leaving you alone at home during the day are quite terrifying too. Besides, you've already made an appearance at class last time... In other words, problems are being resolved automatically one by one. Take this."

Haruaki shifted his hand from the cardboard box and made a gesture as if surrendering completely. With trepidation, Fear opened the lid to peer at the contents.

"Wow..."

She let loose an indescribable exclamation. The box contained a school bag, textbooks, several notebooks, stationery, as well as a brand new female uniform packed in a plastic bag—In other words, a complete set of school life essentials. When Haruaki signed for the delivery just now, he confirmed that the sender was the school superintendent. Apparently, not only did he help Fear fabricate the proper paperwork, but he was also quite thoughtful in this regard.

"T-These are... All mine? Everything?"

"That's right. What's frightening is how everything is fully prepared for you."

Immediately, you can come to school tomorrow. You must remember to thank the superintendent properly then."

But Fear did not seem to be paying attention to his words. Slowly, she took the uniform out of the box. Hugging it against her chest, she examined it closely.

"Fear? What's the matter?"

"What should I do... I... am so happy, so very happy."

Awkwardly turning her shoulders, she looked up at Haruaki while her arms continued to embrace the uniform cautiously. Surprise, shyness, doubt, joy, slight unease. As if unsure which expression to make, the corners of her eyes and lips were raised ambiguously.

"Hey... Does this mean I can stay in that place, just like you? This means it's okay to stay there together with you? Wearing the same uniform as everyone else, having my own family name like everyone else—like a human—this means I can stay there?"

As if trying to transmit a purely affirmative will to her, Haruaki took a deep breath and declared nonchalantly:

"Yes, that's right."

He responded with a smile. He had felt troubled over the fact that this girl unfamiliar with the human world would be going to school. Definitely, the chances of troublesome occurrences would be very high, which was why he had been agonizing up till earlier, but... For Fear to display such an expression, it really was like cheating. Faced with her expression, Haruaki could not bring himself to look worried in front of her—

Fear instantly made a cheerful and overjoyed expression—

"Hey hey, Haruaki, these clothes... Can I try them out right now?"

"Sure... But didn't you wear Konoha's uniform already last time? The design is exactly the same."

"I-I know! But I still want to try!"

If you say so, then do as you like—Haruaki nodded. Wait here for me, you're

not allowed to flee—Fear frantically ran back to her room as she muttered incomprehensibly. Along the way, she even stopped, turned around and called out:

"...I guess I still have to say this to you, umm... Thank you, Haruaki."

I didn't really do anything special—Haruaki smiled wryly as he scratched his head.

"Ufu."

Spinning around.

"Ufufu."

Gliding.

"Ufufufufu..."

Wearing the school uniform, Fear was spinning around before the full-height mirror in the living room. Never getting tired at all. Examining the front view, examining the back view. Then she turned to look at the front, then the back again. Clearly satisfied with the way she looked, she smiled from ear to ear.

"Hmm—Does having your own uniform really make you that happy...?"

Haruaki sipped tea from his cup and said.

"Of course! Ufufu. But anyway, these clothes are really easy to move in. So nice."

"Yeah, probably because the one you wore last time wasn't the right size, moving about was a little inconvenient. After all, Konoha's figure is completely different from yours—"

"Heya!"

With a yell Fear took a giant leap onto the table, her fluttering skirt almost exposing the underside. Crossing her arms, she puffed her chest and looked down at him. Haruaki was just about to scold her for her lack of manners when he almost looked up and caught a glimpse beneath her skirt. Thus he frantically turned away.

"Y-You, what are you trying to say!? Where is the difference in size? Nothing of that sort, completely unrelated! Or perhaps you're obsessed with that body part so you're always staring at other people's chest! You shameless brat, I knew it! I'll curse you!"

"Uwah, I get the message! That's completely not what I meant! Anyway fine, it's my bad! I'm at fault, so stop standing on the table!"

"Seriously... By the way, Haruaki, why haven't you expressed an opinion? I've been waiting for you to say something all along."

"Opinion eh... Hmm—it's a uniform."

What else could he say?

He was about to respond like that but Fear's expression instantly distorted into a sight as vicious as a demon's—Getting that kind of feeling, Haruaki hastily corrected himself.

"No, umm... It's suits you very well! You look so light, it's as if I could carry you home in one arm. So small and space-saving, I guess simply stated, you give off a cute impression like a pet or a mascot, that possibility exists..."

"Hmm, I don't quite get what you're saying, but... It suits me, and it's very cute, right... Cough. Very well."

Fear relaxed her face and smiled idiotically for only an instant, but immediately went "hmph" and resumed her insufferable arrogance. Haruaki somehow got the impression she was deliberately pretending to be displeased but did not pursue the matter.

"You only have one set so it'd be troublesome if you get it dirty. Don't lose yourself in excitement, it's about time for you to take it off. Also, I wanted to remind you just now, when wearing these clothes, don't make huge movements or else—"

"That's true, getting it dirty would be troublesome. Hohoho, I'm really looking forward to tomorrow!"

She really was overjoyed. Ignoring Haruaki's reminder, Fear took a great step to jump off the table. Who knew if she stepped on spilt tea or something but

she slipped—

"Eh?"

"Wah... Hey... Be careful..."

Haruaki reflexively reached out to support Fear who had lost balance but failed to catch her. Instead, he fell over backwards and became Fear's cushion.

"Gah!"

He already knew beforehand, but how could one put it delicately? She really was amazingly heavy. Haruaki felt as if his guts were about to be squeezed out of his body. Just as he was about to grumble, Haruaki opened his eyes to find Fear's fallen posture was riding astride his waist. With her skirt flipped up, the view of the whiteness beneath happened to be presented towards Haruaki as he lay on his back—

"Nwah—!"

Fear frantically pushed down her skirt. The blushing silver-haired girl trembled as she glared at the prey she was riding as her mount.

"Wait, that's why I said 'don't make huge movements,' because the skirt is quite short, you could end up exposing... That's what I wanted to tell you... That, I was only trying to give you a helpful reminder!"

Stuttering, Haruaki explained himself stiffly. At this moment, a sound could be heard from the doorway to the living room.

A towel fell down on the tatami floor. The one standing in shock at the doorway, was undoubtedly the other housemate who was supposed to be in the bathroom—Konoha. Right out of the bath, dressed in a bathrobe, her bosom still seemed to be steaming, her hair slightly moist. Beneath those steaming glasses, her gaze carried surprise and disbelief—towards Fear in the school uniform and Haruaki whom she was straddling.

"A-Ahwawa... Hawawa... Haruaki-kun..."

At this moment, Fear silently got off Haruaki and retreated. Haruaki frantically stood up.

"Konoha, wait a second, you're misunderstanding something..."

"Ooh... Ah. While I was taking a bath, to think you deliberately made her wear a new uniform... A-And had her ride you while you gazed into each other's eyes? What on earth was going on? Haruaki-kun, what were you planning to do!?"

Greatly alarmed, Konoha grabbed Haruaki tightly by the shoulders. Then on the verge of tears with a bewildered expression, she shook him intensely.

"Is this the rumored costume play? So you turn out to have an interest in that? Uniforms are your thing? Just say so earlier and I could have helped you too! Damn it, I know! From now on, I'll wear the school uniform all the time at home, so stop doing these indecent things...!"

"Hey~~! Calm down!"

While he was being violently shaken, Haruaki cast a pleading glance at Fear. But the response he received was—

"Ho... Hoho, could it be that you already peeked while I was spinning around, but feigned ignorance and remained silent... Truly, you're a shameless brat..."

"How could that be possible—!"

Her hair draped over her face, Fear approached—for some reason, holding the Rubik's cube in hand. In any case, she could not possibly intend to actually use that; obviously, she was only showing it as a threat... Probably. But the sight of her holding the cube was frightening enough. Simply poking lightly with that spinning drill once or twice would be painful enough! —Haruaki could not stop himself from imagining such unnecessary scenarios.

"Haruaki-kun, are you listening? Haruaki-kun!"

"Hohohohoho..."

While being shaken vigorously on one hand, Haruaki felt the approach of an astounding presence on the other—

(Sigh... Let's hope this kind of commotion won't be happening in school...)

Unable to escape the feeling that this chaos was some sort of omen for his future school life starting tomorrow, Haruaki sighed feebly to himself.

Chapter 1 - As Fragile as Glass Beads / "Sovereignty-Perfection-Doll"

Part 1

Haruaki and Konoha sighed gloomily together.

"Strange, this is clearly the same route we take to school every day. But what is with this sense of exhaustion...?"

"We even set off earlier than usual but somehow we ended up arriving at school the same time as always..."

The school gates stood before them like some sort of difficult destination. Somehow, the place they visited every day seemed like a desert oasis today.

The cause of their mental fatigue was obviously the new member who started joining their journey to school starting today. Despite their efforts to remind her to walk properly, her elated appearance was unmatched. Wandering this way and that, she had to pet every puppy that was being walked, and was drawn to dumpling sellers as soon as the smell of soy sauce reached her. Walking with a showbiz monkey would probably be easier. After all, there was no way to put a leash on Fear's neck.

On further thought, it was only natural for Fear to be so excited. To her, today was the first time to walk out on the streets normally. Although she ran to school on her own without permission, simply getting there took enough effort such that she had no leisure to enjoy the surrounding scenery. Perhaps her current behavior was a reaction to that.

"Ooh, my sense of unease is ever increasing."

"W-Well, I'm sure we'll gradually get used to it. I think."

Konoha also disputed the decision last night. Clearly, she was worried about Fear going to school when she had yet to accustom herself to human society. To be honest, Haruaki agreed with her.

But then again, leaving Fear home alone could lead to frightening results. After all, there was the precedent of her making a mess of the house. Also, there was no way to be sure that Fear's "enemies" would not return. Hence, they might as well keep her under supervision close by... This final reason was how Haruaki convinced Konoha last night. Then morning arrived. Nevertheless, Haruaki never expected to be met with such exhaustion from the very start of the day.

In any case, they now had to enter the school gates. Haruaki suddenly noticed the disappearance of the footsteps behind him.

Turning around, he was met with the sight of shiny silver hair reflecting sunlight as well as pristine skin as white as snow, even purer than the morning air.

Outside the gates, at the place where all it took was one further step to enter the "school" space, Fear was rooted to the ground, staring up at the school building. As other students cast gazes of curiosity at her silver hair, very incredibly, her expression was quite solemn.

As they neared the school, Fear's meanderings had gradually decreased and the number of times she spoke became more and more restrained. Her pace slowed down, quickened and slowed down again. Haruaki was not oblivious enough to dismiss these changes as simple mood swings.

"Fear, what's the matter?"

"...Hmm."

Relaxing her expression, she looked back at Haruaki. Same as last night, this was a shy and nervous smile.

"Henceforth—From now on, I am a 'student.'"

"That's right."

"Just like you... I've become one of the students."

"That's what I told you already. You're a student, so being late would be bad, let's hurry!"

"Hmm... Yes!"

As if resolving herself, Fear jumped with both legs.

And stepped into the new world known as "school."

This time, she displayed to Haruaki an undoubtedly hundred percent pure smile and said:

"Yay, I've become one of your comrades."

"...!"

Stab. Haruaki felt something pierce his chest, taking his breath away. Incredibly, this sharp stinging sensation felt painful and unbearably ticklish, yet at the same time, not entirely unpleasant. But he had no more time to contemplate this feeling—

"Okay, that's that. Let's go, Haruaki-kun. Being late is unacceptable, absolutely unacceptable! Well then, hurry!"

"Uwah, it hurts... What are you doing, Konoha? I can walk without being dragged, you know!?"



"I'm not listening to you. Seriously... With the way things are... I really can't be careless. Sigh..."

Murmuring to herself, Konoha pulled Haruaki's sleeve with a stern expression.

Unable to understand why Konoha was in a bad mood, Haruaki could only wave and tell Fear to "Hurry and follow" as she watched in puzzlement.

Part 2

The lunch break had arrived. A finished lunchbox on the table before him, Haruaki was currently sipping tea from a water bottle.

"Hmm—Is this really okay? Somehow it feels like things progressed too smoothly..."

"Is that any cause for you to complain? Drinking tea in peace is happiness, didn't you used to say that all the time?"

"That's right. Besides, it's not like nothing happened, right? This morning there was quite a commotion, eh?"

As usual, Taizou and Kana offered their commentary after they finished lunch together.

Prompted by Kana, Haruaki recalled the scene this morning. Wondering how the class would receive Fear, Haruaki's focus was fixated on Fear more nervously than any test or examination.

"Uh—umm, my name is Fear Cubrick... Pleased... Pleased to meet you?"

Her greeting strangely turned into a question. The whole classroom was instantly filled with amazed exclamations of "Wow!" and applause.

"Fear-chan, nice to meet you too! I'm really happy to see you again!"

"Can we be together all the way until graduation?"

"Have you decided which club to join? If you're free, I can give a tour of the track and field club..."

"Hey, stop stealing a march on others! The soccer club currently has no manager! How's that!?"

"No manager!? You mean I'm fired?"

"Tennis club... Those fluttering and really short tennis skirts..."

"Idiot, she should come to the archery club instead! The hakama—think about the massive contrasting effect! Ah! Simply imagining it is...!"

"W-Wait a minute, I can't hear everything clearly. What? Who should I answer? Stop speaking all at once!"

"...!" "...?" ".....!"

That was how it went.

Haruaki looked helplessly into the distance.

"Yeah, what a great commotion... Nothing gets more excessive than that..."

"See? So why are you complaining?"

"I mean, what happened afterwards seemed a bit too natural... Whether you guys or the other students, why are you all acting so nonchalant as if Fear had always been a part of the class? And to think I was so worried earlier, it really makes me seem like a fool!"

"There's nothing to worry about. Her Japanese is perfect, also she is just so~ cute, there's no problem at all! Wow... I never expected to be sharing classes with a girl like that! Akki, good job!"

As Kana said the words "so~ cute," she embraced Fear who was eating beside her and started rubbing their faces together.

"So hot and stuffy, get away from me!"

"Awww, don't be so cold, Fear-chan... I love you...!"

Despite Fear's efforts to push her away, Kana seemed to be deliberately pressing even closer. Clearly she was quite enjoying it. As for why Fear was the only one still eating, that was because Kana and Taizou kept giving her food as if treating her as some kind of pet, thus delaying her from finishing.

"Hmmmm... This adaptability is really overdone—you do realize that the one who transferred in is this sort of weirdo, I hope? Normally, shouldn't you get close more gradually?"

"Chew chew. Yeah, I'm sorry for being a weirdo."

As Fear glared at Haruaki, Taizou hastily comforted her:

"Nothing like that, Fear! The weirdo is definitely Haruaki! Being foreign and a beauty to boot, that can only constitute appeal. Calling you weird is wrong! Seriously... Haruaki, don't say such strange things! It's not like getting along quickly is a bad thing!"

"I second what Taizou says! Besides, this isn't our first time meeting so getting along this way is normal! Just that we never expected we could still see her in school, so there was surprise at first. If you knew about this, why didn't you tell us earlier?"

"...How would I have known? It was a sudden decision."

In actual fact, Fear's situation was like a transfer student's second day at school. Even though Haruaki did consider things turning out this way, which made it easier to accept—But still, it went too smoothly, and was therefore surprising.

(That said, this isn't actually anything bad. But somehow I feel like the risk of Fear exposing her secrets may have become higher... But I already warned her yesterday. Anyway, I can't keep worrying forever so there's not much I can do but keep a closer watch?)

While Haruaki engaged in self-suggestion in his thoughts, Kana and Taizou continued their conversation.

"Speaking of surprise, doesn't it feel like the teachers are all acting different from before?"

"Yeah that's right. Could they be feeling nervous? Yoshimura's stale jokes are more frequent than usual, while Sasaki kept glancing furtively at Fear-chan from the corner of his eye... By the way, Himura was also uncharacteristically smiling on purpose?"

Himura was the mathematics teacher whose face was always obscured by his long hair and always mumbled gloomily when he spoke. Nicknamed the «Ghost»—For someone like that to be smiling, clearly the sight of Fear reading the textbook intently was quite smile-inducing.

"Fear-chan, now that you've had a few classes, how do you feel about them?"

Chewing the sandwich prepared by Haruaki, Fear answered:

"Well... Even though English is very boring to me, I can understand what's being taught in history and biology so that's kind of interesting. If all it takes is memorizing it all, it's really too easy. But taking notes is annoying. Reading Japanese is okay, but I'm still not used to writing it."

"Eh!? It can't be... Fear-chan, you're actually the type who's great at studying? I'm sorry but to be honest, I don't get any of the lectures at all! I had hoped for another fellow comrade with failing marks, nooooo~!"

"Don't cry, Kana, I'm the same... I don't get anything either! You won't have to go to after school supplementary lessons alone!"

"Ah... Taizou!" "Comrades!"

The two bumped elbows together.

I really hope these two's poor influence doesn't rub off on Fear—just as Haruaki observed coldly he was suddenly reminded:

"Right, we originally planned to go say hi during lunch... Fear, we're going to the superintendent's office once you finish eating."

"Yeah, that's right. It's not really right for me to not even know the face of the person who helped me so much."

"...Strictly speaking, I don't know what the superintendent looks like either..."

"...? Whatever, I'm done. Let's go!"

After informing Taizou and Kana, Haruaki and Fear left the classroom—"Woah! I was just about to call you two." They ran into Konoha immediately in the corridor. Then—

"Ah, Ueno-san, good afternoon."

"Hello, why is everyone gathered together?"

The one on her way back to the classroom was the class representative who had revealed her secrets to Haruaki's group earlier—Ueno Kirika. After their customary cooking duel concluded with the usual result, she had finished her lunch first and stepped out, presumably off to the washroom or somewhere.

She suddenly turned towards Haruaki and their gazes met. Without saying

anything, Haruaki immediately averted his gaze. Rather than ignoring her... This happened naturally. They had also greeted each other normally in the morning. But—

(She did tell me to feign ignorance, but... No matter what, it just doesn't feel natural.)

To be honest, Haruaki did have many questions he wanted to ask. About herself, regarding the future, as well as the "enemy" she had taken away to handle—

But he had promised her not to pursue the matter any further. Kirika's only wish was to "continue living a normal school life." To Haruaki, she was a precious friend and classmate, so "I can't fulfill your wish" was not an option.

Still, he could not stop feeling awkward in his heart. Despite the fact that only a little acting was required, it felt like their entire relationship was now shrouded under pretense, completely unnatural—extremely unsettling and unbearable.

"Are you showing her around the school again?"

"Nope, just going to greet the superintendent."

"I see. Yachi, you have to act as a proper escort! That guy—I do believe he is a good person at heart, but his appearance is truly bizarre to the extreme. Don't let Fear mistake him for a pervert and attack!"

I'm not that violent—just as Fear protested completely unconvincingly, Haruaki deliberately forced a smile--but taking care to hide the pretense—and answered:

"Wow, nonchalantly delivering such a harsh comment, Class Rep."

"Really?"

Kirika smiled lightly. Her smile was so natural that it carried not the slightest falseness of pre-established harmony.^[2]

Haruaki knew she only had good intentions but still felt lonely from the sense she was maintaining her distance. But it could not be helped, since this was her wish—Just as Haruaki thought to himself—

"By the way, seeing all of us gathered here reminds me. Kirika, that crazy woman yesterday, what happened to her—"

"Heya!"

Hastily sealing Fear's lips before she could ruin all his efforts, Haruaki grabbed her and turned around, forming a barrier with his back between Kirika and Fear.

"Hey you, didn't we agree earlier, this kind of topic is forbidden...!?"

"Pwah! Listen here... Stop stuffing my mouth shut all the time! Do you really have that kind of fetish? As soon as you see an orifice on a woman's body, you feel compelled to shove something inside? In that case, I have my solution to that!"

"Uwah! Ouch, stop biting! Jeez... Your saliva is making my fingers all sticky..."

"Hmph... Tastes terrible. Season it properly with soy sauce next time!"

"You're going to bite again!?"

"Seriously you two, stop making a ruckus in the hallway... Let's go, we don't have much time left."

At this moment--

"Pu... Hahaha!"

Behind them, Kirika could apparently suppress her laughter no longer.

"Haha, how should I put this... You guys are really quite something, still acting the same. And to think I was so tense, completely like a fool—Hoho. Absolutely ridiculous..."

"Class Rep?"

"N-Nothing. Aren't you heading to the superintendent's office? Hurry, there's not much time remaining."

Time was definitely tight. As Haruaki turned around to continue on his way, he heard a voice from behind:

"Just mindless gossip—The balancing toy has already been handed over for safekeeping. Although it is not a place I can interfere, at least she won't be violently mistreated there. Don't worry."

"Eh?"

Haruaki hurriedly looked back. Somehow he got the impression that Kirika winked momentarily at him as she walked into the classroom.

Part 3

The superintendent's office was located on the top floor of the staff block.

Almost everyone who walked here felt a sense of dizziness. There were two reasons for that. Whether the wide tables or the sofa for guests, the grandness of the furniture caused one to doubt if this was inside a school. Secondly, the walls were covered with various items—helmets from western armor, blow darts, wooden cylinders that smelled of sexual harassment^[3], etc—Completely haphazard and disorganized.

Fear's jaws gaped wide, speechless. This was the natural reaction—Haruaki thought.

"Hi, it's been a while, Haruaki-kun, and you too, Konoha-chan. You must be Fear-chan... I see."

Thud! A dart struck the very center of a dartboard hanging on the wall next to the desk. The seated person who threw the dart quietly swiveled his magnificent chair to face the arrivals.

"I am this school's superintendent, Sekaibashi Gabriel. Pleased to meet you all. I was slightly worried originally, but it looks like the uniform's size is a perfect fit. The gift was well worth the price. Oh right, let me take a picture, this is necessary. Though that said, it's a Polaroid so I can't guarantee the quality... Yes, this is good enough."

A man in an expensive looking suit. Not only was his name strange, but it also suggested a mixed racial heritage, especially given his bright hair color. Age indeterminate. He was supposed to be in his latter twenties but his exact age could not be discerned. As for why—

"Oh..."

"Hmm? What is it?"

"Y-You must be a freak, right? Stay there and don't move, I'm going to take care of you!"

"Hey, stop that! Using an ashtray as a murder weapon only happens in detective novels!"

As Fear was about to throw a heavy glass ashtray, Haruaki quickly reached out with both hands from behind to restrain her. Struggling, she still seemed intent on throwing the ashtray at the suspicious person before her.

Yes, describing him as suspicious was completely accurate. The man was wearing a gas mask on his face, which would not have been out of place at a biohazard battlefield or the scene of a gas leak. But no matter how displaced he was, he should not be casually sitting legs crossed in this superintendent's office.

"Oh, you're surprised by my appearance...? That's only expected for your first time, hohoho."

The man in the well-tailored suit shook his shoulders gleefully. Despite his composed and proper bearing, the laughter coming from the mask gave off a bizarre "ppffft..." kind of sound.

"Woah! See, Haruaki, this guy... This guy is scary! Come up with something, quickly!"

"Hmm—I almost forgot Class Rep's warning... Okay, don't be afraid. Even though this guy looks like that, he is a good person."

Fear finally put down the ashtray in her hand and shrank away slightly.

"B-But that mask... Definitely suspicious!"

"Even though the accusation of strangeness is laid at me, I can't help but agree. My respiratory system has been very frail since birth, so the slightest bit of dust causes a stinging sensation as if tearing my lungs apart. If I don't wear this, I would be a perpetual invalid confined within the white walls of a sickroom."

"What!? It turns out to be something like that!? I-I'm really sorry, I was too impulsive."

No big deal, I'm used to it—the superintendent shrugged. But Haruaki and Konoha glared coldly at him instead—

"I remember the explanation last time was to hide a scar on your face?"

"I was told it was for religious reasons..."

"...Hey, which one is real?"

"Eh, is that so? Whatever, don't let such trivial details bother you, hoho."

Completely untroubled by his conscience, the superintendent threw another dart at the board on the wall. This time it struck the most outer edge.

Indeed, even if he changed his tone and insisted "This is the true explanation" no one would believe him. Since he wore a gas mask at all times, to Haruaki and the rest, this was the superintendent's face.

That said, his appearances in the school were not particularly frequent. The role of the superintendent was but one of his numerous professions. He was always busy and traveling all over the world. Although no one knew what he was actually doing, the only truth Haruaki was certain of was that this man was very wealthy.

"By the way, Superintendent, do you know what my Pops is doing?"

"Not really. His phonecall earlier only asked me to take care of Fear-chan. He seemed quite busy over on his end and I was in the jungle with a bad signal, so we didn't talk for long."

"I see... What? Jungle?"

As always, he was a guy doing unknown business.

"Yes, Papua New Guinea—yes yes, I made another discovery there! This time I am very confident! Would you like to have a look?"

Suddenly without any reason, he took out a wooden mask with various colors bunched together. It looked a bit dirty with strange stains. Simply stated, it was weird. Standing up, he handed the mask over to Konoha.

"How is it? As soon as I laid my eyes on it, my intuition told me I must have found a cursed artifact, am I right this time?"

For some reason, he spoke quite happily. With no choice but to receive the mask, Konoha turned it over and over in her hands, feeling it. Suddenly, Haruaki spoke up and asked:

"I've always been curious, can you actually identify that kind of thing instantly by examining it?"

"No... How should I put it... That works for some but not others... If you want an analogy, it's like looking at the muscles of someone you meet for the first time and then exclaiming 'This person really works out, right?' ...That's the kind of feeling... Isn't it the same for you, Fear?"

"I hate agreeing with you, but yes, that's what it's like."

"Hmm... So I guessed wrong again eh... I'm really far from catching up to Honatsu-san's level..."



The superintendent's shoulders slumped dejectedly as he took the mask back. This man seemed to love "discovering cursed tools," with a bad habit of buying on impulse any suspected object he discovered during his travels abroad. This was also one of the fundamental reasons how he became good friends with Haruaki's father.

"I guess I have no choice but to work harder and improve. Okay, Zenon-kun, could you bring the tea please. A portion for everyone please."

"—Understood."

The one who answered had been standing in a corner in complete silence until now. Her short hair contributed to her striking image as a cool beauty. Even though she was not wearing a suit, her jacket gave off a strangely arrogant impression. As for the lower part of her outfit, she was dressed in a long skirt. Whether in terms of facial expression, attitude or attire, she seemed quite unapproachable in all three areas.

This woman was the superintendent's secretary, Houjyou Zenon. Even in her employer's absence, she still managed this room dutifully. The superintendent trusted her deeply and she also seemed to be privy to the existence of cursed tools all along. Haruaki and Konoha had met her before—though they were not particularly familiar. That said, she did not act particularly intimately towards the superintendent either, so it was probable that she treated family with the same attitude.

Urged by the superintendent sitting before the desk, the entire group sat down on the sofa. Soon after, Zenon returned from the room next door, deftly served tea to Haruaki and his group, handed a straw to the superintendent and returned to the corner in the room. Manipulating the bottom of the mask, the superintendent created a small opening for the straw to enter and began sipping tea.

Fear watched the scene with half-narrowed eyes while Haruaki remained unfazed, already used to the sight.

"Oh yeah, by the way." As he savored the tea, the superintendent reached towards the camera on the desk. Picking up the instant photo, he began to cut it using scissors.

"What are you doing?"

"I said just now that a photo was necessary, right? A medical history for the infirmary is supposed to be attached to the enrollment application... A health survey which requires a photo. I already prepared the application beforehand but there's nothing I could do about the photo."

"The infirmary...? I don't really think I'll have any opportunity to use that place, right?"

"I believe so too, since your body's structure is different from humans. But if you alone lack the health survey form, it'd be strange, right? This is only for plausibility... Okay, it's done. Anyway, please confirm the address as a matter of procedure."

Confirmed. Seeing the "Nothing out of the ordinary" written on the health survey along with a photo of Fear with a silly open-mouthed expression, Haruaki felt rather surreal.

"If there's no problem, please leave it there, I will ask Zenon-kun to hand it in... Also, right! I remembered another thing. Zenon-kun, please."

Then Zenon brought over from the other room something that looked like an old suitcase. It was almost big enough to fit a person and also gave off a particularly sturdy impression.

"I have a request to make of Haruaki-kun. I don't really want to oblige you as an exchange of favors—since I did help fabricate Fear-chan's paperwork, but I'd be very grateful if you could agree to my little request."

"Certainly, even though it's Pops who asked you on his own, I'm really grateful for your help. So long as I'm able to help, I'd agree to any request... So, if you're asking me, that means it's related to cursed tools, right?"

The superintendent nodded and explained that he knew an owner of an antique shop from the neighboring town. Even though it was simply the relationship between a frequent customer and a shopkeeper, due to the purchase of cursed tools, they used to gossip in the past.

"And that person seems to have brought this suitcase to me. I was away at the time and it was Zenon-kun who received it in my stead—Zenon-kun, did he

leave any message?"

The secretary replied calmly:

"Nothing much. 'This is a cursed doll.' 'Surely this thing must be the cause of my daughter's lack of vigor.' 'Please deliver this to that place for safekeeping.' That's all."

"A cursed doll..."

"What a clichéd item. But if that's all he said, not much can really be deduced about its past."

"Eh? You didn't try calling him to ask? Wouldn't it be better to ask first..."

The superintendent shook his head at Konoha's question.

"I did call, but he seems to have... He died on the way back after dropping this thing off..."

"...What?"

The shopkeeper was already quite elderly and had been visiting the hospital recently due to illness. Gabriel slumped his shoulders gloomily, whispering as he explained—Although he had no idea if carrying the suitcase was too much of a strain for the shopkeeper, given he was so ill, sending by post should have been a better solution, right?

The above was what the superintendent discovered when he called and heard from the relative who happened to be at the house, taking care of the estate. Of course, that person was not aware of the doll. The shopkeeper's wife was already deceased so consequently, no one knew anything about the doll.

"Eh? Wasn't a daughter mentioned in the message just now?"

"She seems to be quite difficult to get along with and she doesn't pick up the phone. She was already problematic to begin with, and now combined with the impact of her father's death... Speaking of which, is the reason why she's not coming to school really related to this doll? And to think I specially reserved a spot for her, but she never came, causing me to wonder. Now it seems to make sense."

Nonchalantly exposing his tendency to spill gossip behind others' backs,

Gabriel's words clearly disqualified him as an educator. This guy is really quite a character—thought Haruaki to himself.

Back to the subject at hand, even if their information on hand was practically zero, it did not pose any huge problem for Haruaki. After all, curses did not affect Haruaki and this would not be the first time for him to be entrusted with cursed tools for safekeeping on behalf of the superintendent.

Hence, the superintendent told Haruaki: "Just shove it somewhere in storage." After Haruaki nodded in agreement, Gabriel spoke cheerfully as if trying to dispel the gloomy atmosphere:

"Okay, now that things are decided, I think the actual object warrants a look. Zenon-kun, the key to this suitcase was also under your care, right? Let's open it for a view."

The secretary handed a key over to the superintendent who then unlocked the suitcase.

"Okay, what kind of doll would it be? Since it's cursed, will its appearance be frightening? Or perhaps the opposite, exquisitely beautiful? Actually, is it oriental or occidental in style—should we have a bet? In my view, I'm betting on a South American voodoo doll. What about you, Haruaki-kun?"

"Eh? Umm... Based on the impression, I feel like it's a Japanese doll."

"An ordinary marionette? Anyway, let's just hurry and open it!"

"Well, then my guess is... Chinese style?"

"Excellent, every guess is different. How about you, Zenon-kun?"

The secretary narrowed her eyes and shook her head.

"I do not participate in gambles where value cannot be precalculated. Besides, since the reward has not been quantified clearly beforehand, the bet does not stand."

Even though her face remained completely expressionless, it felt like she really wanted to say "Ridiculous." The superintendent merely shrugged at her usual lack of enthusiasm.

"You're not betting no matter what?"

"Not betting no matter what."

"If you guess right, let's double your salary for the current month."

"I vote for the western doll."

An instant response. Her gaze immediately became five times brighter and even more frightening than usual.

"Great. Well then—let's open the case!"

The superintendent immediately opened the suitcase for all to see its contents.

Haruaki and the rest could not help but gasp. The interior of the suitcase completely exceeded everyone's expectations.

On the other hand, the superintendent opening the suitcase from behind could not see what was within. He seemed to be the type who liked to save fun things to the very end, standing there to prop the suitcase open with great amusement.

"So? Who won, can someone tell me?"

Foo—Zenon sighed.

"...Put in a contrived manner, it would have been me, a minute or so ago. Manipulated by desire, I have surely made a fool of myself."

"Hmm? What is going on?"

"'The bet does not stand'—that's the answer to this wager. Simply stated—"

Completely candidly, she described the contents of the suitcase.

"It's empty."

Time stood still for several seconds.

"W-Why?"

"No idea. I have not touched the suitcase except when receiving the delivery and taking it out just now... In my humble opinion, I did notice that the weight was different compared to when I first received it. I thought it was just my

imagination, but..."

"In other words—there was something inside originally when the shopkeeper brought it?"

Her gaze wavering slightly, Zenon bowed her head.

"I am at fault for its loss while it was under my safekeeping. I am prepared to accept punishment."

When she looked up once again, her eyes were filled with vigor surpassing her earlier state. As if it were a matter of life and death, she asked with a nervous and serious tone of voice:

"—Will my salary be deducted?"

"Do you wish for me to do that? Even if I deduct your salary completely, it won't change the fact of the matter. Hmm... But not handing out any punishment would be irresponsible as an employer. Well then... Okay, since I happen to have the camera on hand, why don't you let me take a picture of your happy face? Make the kind of expression that would get you locked up by airport personnel as they laughed hysterically if you ever used the photo in a passport."

"Then allow me to hand in my resignation today. As for the severance payment, I simply want the privilege of swinging this fist of mine."

Expressionlessly, Zenon raised her fist beside her face. Her other hand was already holding an envelope.

"Just joking." "...Really?"

Then Zenon expressionlessly replaced the envelope titled «Resignation» back into her pocket.

Haruaki was well accustomed to these exchanges between the boss and secretary, hence he ignored them. Once again, he examined the suitcase. No matter how many times he checked, it really was empty. In other words, conceptually, it contained "nothing at all;" but in actual fact, it was a depression lined with white cloth. Based on what Zenon reported, the contents must have disappeared during the few days after she received the case. In that case—

"Hmm... What do you conclude?"

"Isn't it obvious? Unless it was stolen, then—the thing inside 'ran away by itself.'"

Clearly another troublesome incident. Haruaki's statement made Fear greatly alarmed while the superintendent rubbed his mask, his expression indeterminate.

"I see, that's possible too. I didn't even consider that. With no way to ask the shopkeeper the details, what a disaster this is."

"Well, most people wouldn't think of this possibility, right? After all, cursed tools with the ability to take on human form are not that common."

But it would not be surprising to run into one; after all, two of them were standing right here in this room.

"Indeed, if I found myself suddenly being stuffed into a case, I'd want to escape too... Hmm? But wasn't it locked?"

"Since it's a cursed tool, nothing is impossible. For example, I know a doll who could make her hair act like metal wires... Besides, there shouldn't be anything else missing, right? Since there are so many valuables in this room, but no theft had occurred—This rules out the possibility of ordinary thieves."

Listening to the exchange between Fear and Haruaki, the superintendent nodded in agreement, then rested his forehead on one hand as if pondering something.

(Oh no, I have a bad feeling about this.)

Just as Haruaki felt a sudden impulse warning his entire body to bolt out of the room—

"...Very well, there's no other way but to amend the requested task. Haruaki-kun, please find the missing doll."

"I knew it!"

"You're unwilling to do this?"

"I don't know if I should call it unwilling or too difficult..! Since the doll left by

its own will, then I have no idea where to start looking!"

"True, but if the doll is left to roam free, contrary to my friend's dying wishes, wouldn't that weigh on our consciences? Besides, if the doll is not taken care of, perhaps it could cause trouble for others, right?"

"Trouble... Namely, a curse? What kind of curse is it?"

Fear interjected with an extremely serious expression.

"How would I know...? Wait a minute, the message did mention about the daughter lacking in vigor, could that be it? «Life Force Stealing» or something like that?"

"What a cliched curse for a doll. Even though it can't be the person with the hair I mentioned, the resemblance is striking."

"I agree, Haruaki-kun."

"Who are you two talking about? I don't get it at all."

"It's not really important right now, and you'll meet her eventually anyway, Fear... Just a tangent. So, we were discussing the fact that it's not that easy to search for a doll?"

"No, you do not need to trouble yourself over this."

"Why is that?"

Haruaki had barely spoken when Fear stood up from the sofa. Arrogantly crossing her arms, she declared to the superintendent:

"—I want to resolve this incident by myself. I will search for the doll, okay?"

"Of course. All I want is the doll to be found. I won't interfere with the process."

"Wait a minute, Fear, what are you planning to do?"

Haruaki received her direct gaze in response.

"Curses must be lifted by 'helping other people,' isn't that right? I want to be free of my curse as soon as possible... That's why I want to do this. Then I'll be helping the superintendent, right?"

"Your intentions are great, but... Why do you have to go at it alone?"

"This man helped me get into school so I owe him a favor. In other words, I am the only beneficiary. You and Cow Tits do not owe him, so let me be the one to return the favor."

"Idiot, this isn't something you can handle! You not only lack common sense but also an understanding of the town's geography, right? You'll only end up getting lost."

"I-I'm not going to end up lost. I'm not a child! Don't look down on me and stop calling me an idiot! Dummy!"

"Oh really? I'd really like to quote these words of yours to yourself this morning... Without us, I guarantee a hundred percent you would have become a lost child...!"

"W-What did you say? Anyway, if I say there's no problem, there won't be a problem! I will search by myself, so you just wait at home and sip your tea leisurely!"

Unyielding and refusing to flatter or self-reflect, Fear retorted with great vigor in spirit. Perhaps because Haruaki had declared her incapable with complete certainty, she was provoked into complete defiance as a matter of pride.

At this time, Konoha tried to patch things up with an expression as if she had no choice.

"I understand how you feel, Fear, but let's discuss this on a practical level. If you insist on doing this alone, perhaps you might miss something that additional people would have found? We don't even know if three people will manage."

"How would you know if I don't try? In any case, I won't accept your assistance!"

"If you do that and end up with "I can't find it!" result, then that's not really helping, is it? We don't even have any clues as to where the doll went, you know? Going at it alone is rash and unwise."

As expected of Konoha, so reliable. Hmm—Fear began to pout as she glared

at Konoha.

"Okay okay, everyone, please don't make such a serious expression, you've got to relax! Perhaps the doll only escaped five minutes before I entered the room. I came back to school and Zenon-kun went to greet me around 11am, so in all likelihood, the doll is still in the area. Besides, class is about to start soon."

This was truly optimistic and wishful thinking. This sort of optimism, one that no normal person could emulate, was rather enviable.

"In any case, I have to go abroad in the afternoon so I'll be back a week later. If only this could be resolved before then... While I'm away, Zenon-kun will act as backup and follow your orders. Don't be shy, please feel free to ask her for any sort of help."

Even if you tell us to ask her—Haruaki looked up and exchanged glances with Zenon, who nodded gracefully in acknowledgement. Haruaki frantically nodded in return—it was not as if he feared or hated her especially, but somehow he always felt nervous facing her. Zenon's usual attitude lacked friendliness. Even though she was very polite in her manners and would say "Good morning" normally when they met, her facial expression gave off the feeling like she was saying "Executing death sentence. Death to you, pig!" instead.

And now, Zenon spoke up with her usual poker face. What Haruaki heard her say was—

"Everyone let's go meow meow in heaven and hell together today as well!"

"Eh? I-Is Zenon-san out of her mind!?"

"TENTERETENTERE~♪"

"And even singing with a cheerful rhythm? I-Is this some kind of terminal disease... Eh?"

"Mmm... This is the opening theme song for «Meow Meow Paradise Hell»...!"

"—Excuse me, incoming call."

The earlier voice and music apparently came from a cellphone's ringtone. Fear, who listened with her ears perked up, was right. This was the opening theme for that animal show on television. Holding against her ear a pink

cellphone from which dangled an especially cute strap, she took the call.

"Yes. Yes... No, I'll have to ask first."

Speaking softly into the phone, Zenon looked towards the superintendent.

"Hmm? Who called?"

"The infirmary—Ganon-oneesama. She says the infirmary is so hectic it's complete chaos. She hopes I could go over to help out."

"So hectic it's complete chaos. It's been so long since I last heard that expression. Go ahead and help her, but what happened?"

"Yes. She said five or six students fainted and were admitted all at once. Their lives are not in danger."

"How troubling. Was it caused by a gas leak or heat stroke? This must be handled properly."

"Well..."

In a rare moment, Zenon answered hesitantly:

"Neither heat stroke nor gas inhalation are the cause, and of course, there are no external injuries. The only commonality between the admitted students was the fact that 'all were discovered at unfrequented locations.' Other than that, the cause of fainting is unknown. According to Oneesama's description, it's almost as if—their life force had been sucked out by a ghost or something."

Part 4

With the lunch break about to end, the trio sprinted along the hallway.

Running in front was Fear who turned her head back to say:

"You guys don't need to follow! I will catch the doll by myself!"

"Yeah right! Now is not the time to discuss this!"

"Completely correct. Also, Haruakikun... Based on the fact that a large number of people had their life force stolen, perhaps rather than affecting the 'owner,' the curse affects the 'surrounding people.' If we don't stop it, a disaster might be brewing."

"That's right. This is my first time seeing something with that kind of curse and powerful enough to take human form. In various ways, this will be quite troublesome—anyway, let's catch the doll first! Right, Fear?"

"So annoying, what do you want!?"

"Where are we running off to anyway?"

Screech—Fear braked hard in front, causing Haruaki and Konoha to stop hastily, almost losing balance and falling forwards.

Seeing the silver-haired head tilt itself as if emitting a "...?" thought bubble, Haruaki could feel his own face twitching.

"Hey, to the conspicuous little miss over there... I was thinking, could it be possible..."

Haruaki stared at her with half closed eyes. Blushing slightly, Fear retorted:

"What, do you have an objection!? I-I am not simply running around without a goal in mind!"

"Oh? Then what do you have in mind?"

"Well..."

Fear arrogantly crossed her arms but her gaze was wandering and avoiding eye contact.

"...How should I put this, simply stated... Intuition! My subconscious told me this is the direction. I feel like the culprit's presence is summoning me and there's this uneasy feeling flowing from within!"

"That's called having no goal!"

"O-Of course not! Not only that! Umm—just now, didn't the secretary mention that the students were found in unfrequented areas!? So I predicted where the culprit will strike next, and we're heading to a remote location!"

"Definitely, you only just thought of that!"

"Well, even if she made up this reason on the spot belatedly, it is plausible. Based on the current situation, the only reason why there isn't a massive commotion is most likely because no one walked in on the crime while it was being committed."

I didn't make it up belatedly—just as Fear grumbled unhappily, Haruaki surveyed their surroundings. They were now located at the very end of the school building on the ground floor. Before them was the entrance to the hallway that connected two buildings. Passing through this hallway would take them to the science building which housed the laboratories, workshops and other obscure classrooms.

"Indeed, in terms of unfrequented areas, the science building is definitely the top choice even during the lunch break. Since someone did faint here, it would not be surprising for the culprit to be hiding in this place. Let's search!"

Saying that, just as Haruaki was about to step forward—

"—?"

Fear turned her head up to stare at the science building—around the third floor. Following her gaze, Haruaki looked but did not notice anything unusual. It simply looked like an empty corridor.

"What's up?"

"Hmm... Just now I sensed something moving there. Let's check it out!"

She ran noisily forward but then stopped suddenly after a few steps.

For a moment, she seemed to be hesitating.

"...I am really fine alone, so you guys don't need to follow! But... Umm... I am very tied up right now, so if you two decide to follow, I can't stop you. So there! Definitely, this is not because I don't know how to return to our classroom without you. If you dare misunderstand, I'll curse you!"

Fear declared while pointing her finger at Haruaki and Konoha. Then she sprinted towards the science building. What a troublesome girl—Haruaki and Konoha shrugged at each other.

Currently, they still had not obtained any new information about the doll. Whether or not Fear was mistaken, all they could do was follow the lead.

Following the jumping silver hair through the hallway and up the stairs, they reached the third floor of the science building.

The instant they went up the stairs and stepped into the corridor, they finally realized Fear's reaction just now was only natural.

Nothing was there—Not exactly.

Something was there.

(I'm not surprised. Collapsed on the ground, of course I couldn't see it from outside the window...!)

A male student lay unconscious on the floor. Kneeling beside him was a white fluttering figure—the figure stood up and went into a neighboring classroom.

That was all they could see from the corridor.

"I knew there was something...! Hey, hold still right there, you fluttery fellow!"

Fear roared and rushed forward as the vanguard. Haruaki did not expect her to find the target so quickly, but at least this was way better than failing the search. Predicting that the culprit roamed the less frequently visited science building turned out to be correct... Since this prediction was thought up only

after the fact, in terms of results, Fear's intuition could not be underestimated.

Located on this floor were toilets, the biology lab, the biology preparation room—then further away there was the dressmaking and preparation rooms. The fainted male student's position was at the door to the dressmaking room. In other words, the strange figure had escaped into the dressmaking room.

"Konoha, how is this guy's condition...?"

"He's okay, no external injuries. It feels like he only fainted. I don't know if it's the same as the others who were sent to the infirmary..."

Konoha answered as she felt the boy's pulse. It was reassuring to know he was in no particular danger. However—

"It's a bit mean, but let's move him over to the infirmary after we check out the situation. If we let the culprit escape, all our efforts would be wasted."

"How merciless... But indeed you are right. Okay, Fear, open the door!"

Bursting through the door, the trio entered the dressmaking room.

This was a classroom that smelled of dry fabric, like a secondhand clothing store. Arranged neatly in rows were fold tables with sewing machines. The door beside the blackboard led to the neighboring dressmaking preparation room. Hung on the back wall were various fabric samples and shelves overstuffed with doll creations of the crafts club. In a certain sense, just like the superintendent's office, this place did not resemble a school space.

But because of that, the figure standing by herself in the classroom, equally removed in style from a school setting, seemed rather fitting against such a background.

Standing in front of the blackboard, she was on the opposite side of the lectern relative to Haruaki.

The upright figure swayed subtly—then slowly turned around.

A girl with facial features so exquisite they seemed to be artificial. Her emotionless eyes carried a sense of clarity like glass beads. Her cheeks remained completely motionless. That pristine complexion of hers was as white as snow, though the excessive pallor suggested illness or perhaps an inorganic

impression. As for that long hair which swayed with her movements, that too, gave an impression as if it did not belong to the body for every strand of hair resembled fine threads woven into a work of art—sleek, soft and lustrous.

"...You must be the doll, right? At least you don't look like a student."

Despite Fear's attempt to strike up conversation, she remained unmoved, simply narrowing her eyes slightly.

Just as Fear pointed out, it was at least apparent that she was no student—she was not wearing a uniform. Instead, her outfit was primarily white with fluttering wavy frills all over. Although the dress was full of gothic style that one would only find on television normally, there was not the slightest sense of ostentatiousness. Rather, it felt more noble, elegant, high-class... Undoubtedly, if an example was needed, then it was a perfect outfit for an "antique doll" to be wearing—

"..."

As glances were exchanged, time was ticking away. The hostility in the girl's eyes made Haruaki swallow. What should he do? This was in school, not to mention during the lunch break. If this girl was hostile and attacked anyone on sight, she could not be permitted to escape—even if the cause was her curse.

As much as he wished to avoid it, but in consideration of the situation, perhaps the use of force was necessary.

The problem was, even though this place was less frequented, there was no guarantee other students would not pass by—That's right, even facing off like right now, perhaps there would be others—

"Wah! S-Someone fainted here! Are you okay? What happened?"

"Damn it, just as I was worrying about the possibility, someone did arrive!"

They could hear shouts and the clatter of approaching footsteps from the corridor outside. A girl Haruaki had never seen before. Her reaction was only natural. Anyone who discovered the unconscious student would realize the dressmaking room's door was open. Timidly, she peered into the classroom—"May I ask what happened to this person here...?"

Faster than Haruaki and the rest could respond to the new arrival, a voice sounded out, so cold it must have escaped from beneath permafrost:

"Oh my... Shiraho, it's been a while. Let me take this opportunity to express my sentiments. The case was too cramped."

The girl who had remained silent till now, slightly... Truly, she only twisted her lips slightly to speak to the girl student. Rather than joy, that twisting process expressed arrogance as if gazing down condescendingly at a surrendered foe.

"...!"

The girl student referred to as Shiraho displayed alarmed surprise and was rooted to the spot.

(What is going on? They know each other...? In other words—)

While Haruaki was deep in thought, the girl took a few steps stiffly as if one leg was limping. Leaning one hand against the lectern to support her weight, she stiffly turned towards everyone. In terms of position, the lecture almost seemed to be acting as a temporary shield.

"Having to move my own body is truly troublesome. Humans are truly troublesome."

"Hmph, are you still unused to a human body? —Even though the answer is obvious, let me ask you once again. Are you the doll that was kept at the superintendent's office?"

Fear asked with a severe gaze. The inorganic girl replied inorganically:

"«Sovereignty Perfection Doll»—that is the name bestowed upon me. Since it's quite a mouthful, you may call me what you wish, human."

"Is there something wrong with your eyes? We are of same kin. And Cow Tits behind me as well."

"...Same kin?"

The girl mildly raised a dignified brow.

The next person to speak was the student who intruded midway—Shiraho. With an unbelievable expression, she stared at the girl—

"Why...? Why do you have to do this?"

"Because it is necessary. You do understand, do you not?"

Her answer was completely cold and merciless.

"By the way, perhaps you may wish for my return but I refuse. I will never go back to that place."

Shiraho bit her lower lip sadly. Forcing out her voice, she slowly called out the other's name.

"Sovereignty..."

"So that's that. Enough said, yes?"

"Of course not. What the heck is going on? And who is this girl?"

Fear threw a slanting stare at Shiraho as she asked. Konoha pushed her glasses with an exasperated expression:

"Combining various facts, the answer is obvious... Could you use your brain a little? Also, listen carefully to what others are saying."

"What did you say!?"

"Hey hey, now is not the time for quarreling! Didn't the superintendent mention? The antique shopkeeper lived with no one but his daughter. And the daughter is enrolled in this school."

"Yeah. So?"

"So the girl here who knows that doll... Are you the antique shopkeeper's daughter?"

"Yes..."

Shiraho nodded. As expected, she was no ordinary person... Then at least there was no need to hide the truth. Definitely, before resorting to force, something had to be done first.

"Okay, perhaps you may not be aware of the entire situation, so listen to me first. I am simply a human, Yachi Haruaki from First Year Second Class. We were asked by the superintendent to find you."

"I have no intention of listening to you, human. I hate humans."

The doll before his eyes—Sovereignty cut Haruaki off decisively.

"That's right, I hate humans. I have no intention of listening to humans again. Neither will I follow human commands. After reaping the puppet show's reward, I will slumber somewhere deep behind the dusk-colored curtain like an obedient puppet."

Did she mean that having absorbed enough life force, she had no further need to remain in the premises? Slowly, she dragged one leg as she retreated. Towards the window or the door to the dressmaking preparation room?

Fear dashed forward and called out:

"Wait, with all that you've done, don't even think you can escape!"

"Why would you think I won't be able to escape? Kin. Especially in *this kind of place*."

Shiraho looked up as if realizing something. Sovereignty glanced at her with one eye and continued speaking:

"I hold sovereignty over every doll—Those bearing visual semblance, listen and show proof of your worship. Obey. Obey. Obey."

Sovereignty's voice carried an unbelievable rhythm.

In that instant, a strange clattering sound was heard from the back of the classroom.

"Over there... What is going on...?"

A small figure dropped down from a shelf on the back of the classroom. One of those creations of the crafts club? There were dolls of various shapes and sizes. As if having acquired self-awareness, these dolls armed themselves with the dressmaking scissors and sewing needles sharing the same shelves and successively jumped onto the desks. In a certain sense, this was truly a fantastic sight; nevertheless, based on the numbers—as well as the sharp weapons in they wielded, it was hardly a comforting sight, instead resembling more of a low budget horror movie.

"I am the all-powerful doll created to fulfill the kingly role. What I have

acquired from the curse is the manifestation of royal authority. Hence, all things bearing human form are under my rule—"

While she was speaking, the first doll leading the march across the desks jumped at Haruaki. Terrifying. Even though it was only armed with scissors and needles, being stabbed in the eyeball would be no joking matter.

"Stand back, Haruaki!"

Fear took out the Rubik's cube from her uniform pocket. Gripping the cube whose shape resembled her true form, she reminded herself of a certain unforgettable incident, then adjusted her breathing and—

"Mechanism No.26 piercing type, imprisoning form: «Iron Maiden»—Curse Calling!"

She yelled out loud.

But—

".....Eh?"

Nothing happened. Holding the Rubik's cube with her arm extended, Fear tilted her head in puzzlement.

But Haruaki's crisis was not going to be resolved by a mere "Eh?" As Fear stood there bewildered, the scissors wielding doll was fast approaching Haruaki—at this moment, Konoha swiftly intervened. With the flash of a karate chop, the doll was struck down, its cotton guts spilling out and scattering.

"Hey, could you be a bit more serious!? You know that move can't be used anymore!"

"S-Shut up! I simply forgot for a moment!"

In actual fact, Haruaki had forgotten as well. After the incident ended yesterday, they had obtained the mysterious card—the Indulgence Disk. After inserting it into Fear's interior, her iron maiden was no longer available.

"In that case—Mechanism No.11 tearing type, jagged form: «The Teeth», Curse Calling!"

But even without the iron maiden, Fear still held power in her hands.

The Rubik's cube transformed into a black metallic cube then swiftly changed forms into a vicious torture tool.

This was a long thick saw with densely packed triangular serrations along its edge. It felt like it could lop off someone's finger with extreme ease. Of course, used correctly as a saw—let alone fingers, even arms, legs, necks or skulls could be severed in a single strike.

Using her saw, Fear blocked the pouncing dolls and effortlessly swept them aside. This simple motion was enough to shred the dolls into scattering scraps. Being creations of cloth, the jagged teeth of a saw proved to be more effective than axes or blunt weapons.

"Since the opponents are dolls, I don't have to hold back at all. After all, they won't bleed."

"I agree completely with you."

As Konoha and Fear intercepted the incoming wave of dolls, fabric was shredded like skin while cotton burst apart like guts.

"...What... Is going on...?"

"Oh, this is dangerous, you'd better stand back a bit."

Shiraho watched in shock as the scene unfolded before her. Haruaki lightly held her hand and said:

"Perhaps you don't quite understand the situation, but just leave it to them to handle. Don't worry."

"...Yes. But..."

Her gaze was focused on Sovereignty naturally. As Sovereignty slowly retreated, her face remained calm but displeasure could be seen from her gaze directed towards Fear and Konoha.

"Clearly—You two are completely different from me in nature. Are you sure you aren't the kin of violence instead? Kin. Rather than healing people's hearts, you were born to harm others. How terrifying."

"Mmm, shut up... Don't think you can escape, stand still!"

But of course Sovereignty was not going to stand still just because Fear ordered. Faced with the continuous onslaught of dolls, Fear was completely occupied and could only attack verbally. Likewise for Konoha.

"From what you said, you seem to think you are something for healing people's hearts? Don't make me laugh. How could something like that cause innocent students to faint? In fact, certain doubts arose earlier in my mind, so I'd be grateful if you would answer."

As Konoha continued to sweep dolls away with her arms and legs, she glared sharply at Sovereignty.

"That your curse absorbs life force from humans, I can understand. But—why do you have to do it in this school? Since you already escaped the case, wouldn't it be more normal to run as far away as you can first? No matter how the desires of your curse compels you, once you get outside, there are as many humans as you could ever need. Hence there should be no higher priority than fleeing from the school, right? Simply stated... Some particular reason compels you to absorb life force only in this school, right?"

"—!"

Opening the door to the neighboring dressmaking preparation room, Sovereignty's hand trembled as it gripped the door handle. As if reprimanding her disgraceful hand, she glared at it for a few seconds before turning her narrowed eyes towards Konoha.

Like swinging a sword to remove blood on the blade, Konoha got rid of the scraps of cloth stuck to her hand from the dolls.

"...I was merely speculating, but based on your reaction, I can't be far from the truth."

Only displaying the wavering in her heart for an instant, Sovereignty immediately resumed her usual cold and unapproachable expression.

"Even if I denied, you won't believe me, right? Clever kin."

"Eh! Stop worrying about that! Cow Tits, hurry and catch her! Think of a way quickly!"

"I'm really trying... But the numbers are too great!"

Gazing at Fear and Konoha, as well as Haruaki and Shiraho behind them, the doll nodded lightly.

"—After all, you'll realize it straight away, so I might as well tell you. I am leaving now, but I'll be back to absorb life force in this school again. Giving you clues by causing trouble in town would be utterly stupid, so I will behave myself outside. Searching for me outside of school is futile—if you want to capture me no matter what, give your best shot and prepare a giant mousetrap here."

"What...! Why are you telling us this... What are you trying to imply!?"

"There is no need to tell you the reason."

"Damn it...! Fu... That's right, because we will catch you right now! Cow Tits, I'm leaving the rest to you!"

Just as the density of dolls finally decreased, Fear left Konoha to handle them and leaped with a forward flip.

Sovereignty slipped through the door into the preparation room without any anxiety on her face.

"Do you really think those cotton-filled dolls are my only pawns? If you don't want your efforts to protect those behind you go to waste, I would advise you to stop right there."

"What...?"

As Fear displayed surprise, from behind Haruaki—something flew into the dressmaking room from outside the door.

Two human-sized mannequins. The human anatomy and skeletal models from the biology lab on the same floor.

The skeleton was approaching especially swiftly. Haruaki frantically stepped forward to shield Shiraho and crashed into the model with his body. However, his opponent did not even budge. The sense of weight and sturdiness far surpassed its appearance—or perhaps due to being under Sovereignty's control, there might be some special power at work. At the same time, the violent impact against his shoulder made his left arm sting.

(Ouch...! Oh right, my wound still hasn't...!)

Regrettably, Haruaki was a human without super powers. A single night's rest was not enough to heal his wounds from the previous day. Just as he was reeling back unsteadily from the pain, the skeleton's fist struck him in the gut. Powerless, Haruaki was sent falling backwards. The skeleton advanced and jumped up, intending to follow up with another attack on Haruaki as he lay on the floor.

"Don't think you can succeed!"

Konoha suddenly intervened with a flying kick, slicing off the skeleton's skull and sending it flying. Like her karate chop, this kick was infused with sharpness equal to a bladed weapon.

During this time, the other anatomy model was stiffly approaching Shiraho as its joints creaked noisily.

"Tsk... The girl over there! Duck quickly!"

"Eh... Wah?"

"—Mechanism No.5 impaling type, upright form: «A Skewer Loved by Vlad Tepes»!"

Gripped in Fear's right hand, the chain of cubes made a sound. Rattling as it extended, the long slender execution stake shot out like an arrow. The spiked pedestal used for standing upright could only act as useless tail feathers. Launched horizontally, the stake pierced the anatomy model squarely in the abdomen, sending it flying towards the wall beside the door, nailing it firmly with conspicuous cracks in the wall.

With that, the classroom finally settled down. Fear smacked her lips and said:

"...She escaped."

Surveying the scene, there were no signs of Sovereignty, not even the sound of footsteps.

"An unfavorable location, their numbers were too great... Are you okay, Haruakikun? Seriously, your wound has not healed completely, so don't force yourself."

Konoha helped Haruaki to his feet. Shiraho frantically ran over with a twisted expression like a kitten's. However—

"Umm... Is your stomach okay? I'm sorry, it's all because of me... Huh?"

"Gwuh!"

Perhaps stepping on a doll's fragment, Shiraho slipped and lost balance, falling forwards. Unable to stop the impact of her fall, Haruaki fell over backwards as well. Thus, Shiraho became straddled over his waist—Something similar also seemed to have happened yesterday.

"Oh no! N-Not allowed,
whether Haruaki is hurt or not this will strain his body such intimacy I cannot ignore!"

Smiling as her face twitched, Konoha displayed a strange expression. Like an Italian soccer defender, she inserted herself between Haruaki and Shiraho with exceptional skill and forcefulness, then pushed Shiraho away as if nothing had happened.

"Ah... S-Sorry, I was in too much of a panic."

"Oh, hmm. I understand, but still... Basically, now is not the time for this kind of thing!"

"That's right, that doll should still be within school premises, let's hurry and find her—However, no matter what kind of circumstance, only a shameless brat would be interested in positioning himself beneath a girl's skirt, right? But do as you wish, to each their own."

Fear withdrew the stake back into the Rubik's cube with displeasure. It's not like it was on purpose—Haruaki retorted furiously, but the bell rang at the same time. They were already due for a scolding for skipping last Saturday's classes, but it now looked like they had no choice but to skip today's fifth period as well.

Then the group swiftly divided roles between themselves. Although they had no idea how far Sovereignty could have traveled while they were breaking the human models, she should still be within the confines of the school, so their first priority was to prevent her from escaping outside. Konoha was to hide herself at the school's front gates and monitor the entrance. The school's buildings were enclosed in high walls while the sports ground was surrounded

by sturdy fencing and wire nets. Given the mobility she displayed, climbing over these barriers should be impossible.

Meanwhile, Haruaki and Fear were to deliver the fainted male student to the infirmary as quickly as possible, then start searching within the school—Given the current situation, it was possible she had already escaped the school, so searching might be simply a waste of effort, but it would feel wrong to do nothing.

"Okay! Let's go!"

"Wait, Fear, one more thing—Uh... You're named Shiraho, right? What are your plans now?"

This question seemed to send Shiraho into deep thought, her eyes wandering for a moment—

"Yes... Call me Shiraho. I will accompany you to look for Sovereignty."

She looked up as she spoke. Haruaki examined her face once more. She possessed a cute face that naturally gave the impression that smiling was well-suited to her. She must be a cheerful girl originally, right? But now, her expression only showed worry as she gazed up at Haruaki.

A simple sentence supplemented her reason for coming along for the search.

"Because we're friends."

Ah, I see. So being rejected openly by a friend was what made her so troubled and shocked. That was all Haruaki could tell at this point, even though he wanted to know more about their relationship—

"...I see. If there's an opportunity, I hope to ask you more while we're searching. Anyway, it'd be bad if the teachers discover us, so please keep your voice low."

Shiraho nodded in agreement. Konoha then nodded and said:

"Then I'll be going to monitor the school gates. You guys take care."

"You take care too. Also, if that person appears, don't engage in outrageous combat in full view of the public!"

"...I'm not lacking in common sense like a certain person, please don't worry."

"W-What did you say!?"

Ignoring Fear, Konoha left the dressmaking room. Having decided their roles, Haruaki and his group no longer needed to remain in this classroom. In any case, they had to move the fainted male student to the infirmary first. Hence everyone entered the corridor.

At this moment, Haruaki felt the tip of his indoor shoe stepping on a hard object. Checking it, he found a blue bead, most likely an eye from a wrecked doll that had rolled along the floor and stopped against the wall.

Somehow, it felt like the omen of some unfortunate fate.

Haruaki terminated his imagination and shifted his gaze away from the fallen eye bead.

Even if she was something that harmed humans, that beautiful doll was the same kind of existence as Fear and others.

Most definitely, Haruaki did not wish for her glass-like eyes to end up rolling on the floor like this bead.

Chapter 2 - That Which Escapes the Seer's Eyes / "for their reasons"

Part 1

Taking walks in the shop when her father was not around was one of Sakuramairi Shiraho's few rare hobbies.

Inside the dim shop with the metal shutters down, behind the counter was where the residence connected. Surrounded by shelves of antiques, she strolled along the passages between them. Quite a cramped place to take a walk but enjoying this purposeless wandering was amusement in itself. If one had to articulate into words, there was no description as apt as taking a walk.

Indeed it was purposeless. Neither tending to the shop, nor staying on alert, nor cleaning, nor examining the antiques out of interest, nor assessing her father's wealth so as to steal it. All she did was circle about repeatedly within the cramped shop, blankly gazing at the antiques, feeling the serenity beneath the dim ceiling, smelling the slightly musty odor in the air.

Encapsulated in one sentence—she simply liked staying in this space all alone without any other people.

But one particular day, things went differently.

As usual, she was walking in the shop, savoring the feeling as if she had turned into an antique herself.

Suddenly, Shiraho recalled the delivery of the antique doll her father had bought a few days ago from abroad. She was not terribly interested but having

a look would not hurt. Where had that thing been placed?

Hence she surveyed the dim interior of the shop. At this time—

From behind she heard what sounded like friction in a doll's joints—then a quiet voice.

"—Are you looking for something? That said, you look like you're just taking a walk."

This occurred half a year ago.

The first encounter between «Sovereignty Perfection Doll» and Sakuramairi Shiraho—A precious and unforgettable moment.

Part 2

Suddenly spoken to, Shiraho naturally received quite a fright. Faced with the fact of the matter before her eyes, she had no choice but to accept. Since the doll would be eventually sold off if displayed in the shop, she had an argument with her father at one point and even unilaterally took Sovereignty back to her room to make it her own possession. Henceforth, Shiraho and Sovereignty developed a confiding relationship as friends. Occasionally, Sovereignty would make other dolls move to amuse Shiraho, but she never recounted her past or the process with which she became human, hence Shiraho had no idea of such details—

While listening to Shiraho's whispered explanations, Haruaki walked along the quiet hallways while class was in progress.

As his ears listened to her voice, his eyes were focused on searching for Sovereignty.

Was there anything moving in the hallways?

Was there anything hiding in the shadows?

Anything unusual going on?

He did not wish to see more victims. Neither could he allow any further victims to appear. Hence they had to capture Sovereignty as soon as possible. If she were still within the school, the opportunity must not be lost—

"Then a few days ago... The sound of us conversing in my room was discovered. Sovereignty hastily pretended to be just a doll, but my father was not fooled. He declared that buying this thing was a mistake and that he will leave Sovereignty at a friend's place, so he took her away forcefully—From that day on, she never came back. Afterwards... Because I was busy handling funeral affairs from my father's sudden passing due to a flare up of his illness..."

"Yes."

"I was finally free today. Finding out about my father's friends and acquaintances from relatives at the funeral, I wondered if the person to whom my father entrusted Sovereignty was our school's superintendent. Sovereignty and I are friends, so I must find her... Wah!"

"Wah?"

Turning back, Haruaki found Shiraho crouched down, trembling as she held her shin in pain... The apparent culprit was the water cooler in the hallway.

"...S-Sorry, I didn't watch where I was going—Yah!"

Just as she forced a smile and stood up, she stepped on the dispensing pedal. The resulting spurt of water made the front of her uniform all wet.

"Uwah—all wet..."

"...!"

The drenched uniform clung tightly to her figure, displaying convex curves which surpassed Fear but inferior to Konoha. Furthermore, there were no obstructions in the outline from her collarbone down to her chest, thus presenting a perfectly curved surface, this undoubted meant—

(S-She's... Wearing nothing but the uniform...?)

Haruaki could not help but gulped hard. Suddenly he was elbowed in the flank. Fear, who had been watching the surroundings alertly, was now glaring at Haruaki and Shiraho severely.

"What are you two doing? Completely laid back! Finding out about the past is fine, but you've got to focus on finding that doll!"

"S-Sorry! I panic too easily..."

Hmph—Fear snorted and forcefully threw open the cleaning cupboard in the hallway to check inside.

The only one laid back is Shiraho—Haruaki protested in his mind as he turned his attention to the surroundings. He could vaguely hear the sound of class in progress inside the neighboring classroom, so there would be no point in

checking. Dividing up, Haruaki searched the male washroom while the girls checked the female side separately. No discoveries either.

"Looks like this floor is done... Let's check the one below."



Swiftly descending down to the next floor, Fear seemed quite concerned about the matter.

"So you came to find the doll that was taken away—which is why you're searching together with us now, right?"

"Yeah."

"Hmm...? Wait a minute, I just remembered. The superintendent said you haven't been coming to school previously, right? Will your condition be okay, coming here so suddenly today?"

Condition? —Shiraho tilted her head in puzzlement. Frankly speaking, I wouldn't be surprised if this airheaded girl suddenly rolled down the stairs—Haruaki stayed on alert in case he had to catch her in an accident as he continued speaking:

"Namely, why you didn't come to school before... Perhaps you were unaware, but wasn't it because Sovereignty absorbed your life force? Then you recovered after the doll was taken away? Your father's message did mention that 'this doll is the cause of my daughter's lack of vigor' or something like that."

"Ah... Oh~ I see. It was my father's misunderstanding."

"Misunderstanding? Okay. Anyway, let's check the calligraphy classroom over there. Even though it's hardly used, the door is unlocked. It would not be strange for someone to be hiding in there."

They had descended the stairs without incident and arrived at the calligraphy classroom at one end of the second floor. They searched the cupboards and under the desks as the modest smell of ink invaded their nostrils. Fear resumed the interrupted conversation.

"...By misunderstanding, what do you mean?"

"Uh... My life force wasn't being sucked away. Why I didn't come to school earlier, was because... Umm... Personal reasons, not because of my physical condition. Yes. Because of family reasons..."

"What reasons? If you're healthy then coming to school can't be that difficult, right... Ooof! Hey, Haruaki! Why did you poke me in the flank? That is a

sensitive spot, you know? Shameless brat!"

"You can't carelessly probe into other people's private affairs. You have to learn how to pick up cues and show some tact... I'm sorry, this girl here doesn't know how to be considerate..."

"Umm... It's okay, I don't mind."

Haruaki recalled what the superintendent mentioned. About her mother passing away and how she did not get along with her father. He also mentioned she was supposed to be a difficult child to get along with—

(Hmm~... But based on her personality, there shouldn't really be a problem with friendliness...)

As if sensing something from Haruaki's gaze, Shiraho slightly widened her eyes. Then she walked over to the windowsill in the calligraphy classroom and opened the window to look outside. After all, they should not focus all their attention within the school.

Originally refusing to go to school, she only came in search of her friend. This must have involved extraordinary suffering and resolve. Nevertheless, after taking such great pains to find her friend, her wish was rejected and the friend even declared she would continue harming others and not return. To Shiraho, this was betrayal and clearly a change had occurred in their relationship.

Even so, Shiraho remained the same, seeking her friend with sincerity... Albeit rather clumsily. Even now, her skirt was fluttering in the wind rather precariously unless she held down the hem slightly.

In order to avoid seeing something fatal, Haruaki turned his gaze to searching the classroom. But all possible hiding places had been checked already without any results.

"Tsk, not in this classroom either... I think we understand your basic situation now, but the current problem is how we can capture the doll. Shiraho, what do you see outside?"

"Nothing special... Just a wall and a bronze statue."

"Having searched fruitlessly for so long, I guess we should start considering

the possibility she already escaped the school... The outer walls are quite high and I remember there's barbed wire on top. Given her mobility, I don't think she could climb over them easily—wait a minute, what was that about a bronze statue?"

Rushing over to the window, Haruaki saw a human sculpture that was truly full of artistic flair. Some kind of friendship gift from who knows where, Haruaki could only conclude its only purpose was wasting space on Earth.

"How strange, that should be positioned a bit further on that side instead...!"

The bronze statue's original position should be beside the incinerator a few dozen meters away—quite a rude location to keep a friendship gift but that thing was really too obtrusive anywhere else. Definitely, the gift giver was someone one did not have to worry about taking offense.

Reaching his head out the window for a better look, Haruaki found an empty pedestal beside the incinerator. Simply stated, the bronze statue had move separately from the stand. Currently, the statue was leaning against the outer wall as if acting as someone's stepping platform—

"...!"

Exchanging glances with one another for a few seconds, Haruaki and the rest then rushed out of the classroom.

Sluggish Shiraho almost tripped when exiting the front steps but Haruaki anticipated the situation and caught her. Looks like you're always keenly looking for chances to catch girls in your arms—Fear's cold glare seemed to be transmitting such a message. Enduring her gaze, Haruaki continued running.

They finally reached the narrow space between the school building and the outer wall. The ground floor of the building on this side had no windows, thus created a sealed alleyway. The cream-colored wall was roughly three meters tall, which meant that it was at a borderline height where one might just barely climb over with a leap. However, the previous description only applied from the standpoint of an unassisted attempt to get over the wall—

"...Damn it, this thing was being used as a stepping platform?"

Fear smacked the bronze statue's head.

"I-I'm sorry I didn't realize immediately... Because it's my first time at this school, I didn't think it was out of place..."

"It can't be helped, don't worry about it... Ah, Fear, do you see that? The thing stuck on the barbed wire."

"Looks like a scrap of torn clothing. Very similar to that fluttery outfit a certain person was wearing."

"Just as I thought. If she escaped while we were searching the school building, who knows how far she's gone... Damn it, this is really our oversight."

Given her awkward movements, she could not climb over the outer wall—What a rash conclusion. They had forgotten to consider her ability to control dolls—with just a little assistance, even her mobility was enough to traverse the wall. Her earlier limping image gave rise to preconceived notions, but one should not forget she was not human.

Haruaki had no choice but to admit.

Undoubtedly—they had missed the chance to capture Sovereignty.

Haruaki slouched dejectedly. What should they do next—Shiraho gazed up uneasily at the fabric torn on the barbed wire.

Without saying a word, Fear kicked the innocent statue, sending it rolling on the ground.

Part 3

Classes were still in progress. In any case, they ought to sit down and reflect calmly first, so they went to the vending machines to buy cup-dispensed beverages near the shoe lockers. Smiling awkwardly, Shiraho confessed: "My purse is in a pinch right now." Hence Haruaki treated her as well. Then the three of them moved to a bench in the courtyard.

"Umm—Is this really okay?"

"I'd feel bad for us to be having beverages while you're left out. Consider it a sign of our friendship!"

"Ehehe, how embarrassing. Thank you."

"Besides, someone else is already freeloading on me anyway, so it's not much of an extra favor."

Haruaki cast a slanting glance at Fear whose face had become quite tense, seemingly vexed at letting Sovereignty escape. Sitting beside Haruaki, she spoke as she drank her juice:

"What!? If only I had money... Oh yeah, today when I was chatting with classmates, I learned about the concept of pocket money. I heard that everyone gets it from someone? Hand it over."

"What do you mean, hand it over? That's a really novel manner of requesting something. Anyway, it's too early for you."

He slapped her outreached hand with a smack. Fear snorted with displeasure and downed the rest of her juice with one pour of the cup. Watching this transpire, Shiraho could not help but chuckle.

Having ended the conversation, Haruaki stared blankly at the blue sky delineated by the straight outline of the school building.

He was pondering about the future. Regarding Sovereignty who had escaped

as well as her declaration that she would continue absorbing life force within the school—even though he could not understand the meaning behind it, he was certain he could not allow her to proceed.

Haruaki recalled the male student who had fainted in the hallway. According to the school physician, the symptoms of the victims resembled malnutrition. All they needed was an IV drip and proper rest to recover eventually.

Eventually. Perhaps days or weeks later. Moreover, future victims might not be limited to the effects displayed today. In the worst case, students could be weakened to the point of death. Even if not to that extent, perhaps they would catch other illnesses as a result of their weakened condition—

Shiraho also seemed to be contemplating the future. Then she spoke quietly:

"So, uh—Haruaki-kun. Can I confirm something with you? I asked just now, but are you guys really not planning to destroy Sovereignty...?"

Haruaki had already explained about themselves while they were patrolling the school building. Regarding curses, the Yachi home, Fear and Konoha—as well as what happened during their search for the doll to return the superintendent's favor.

But simply searching for Sovereignty was troubling enough so Haruaki only covered the basics. Shiraho probably had more questions to ask, especially about the future fate of her friend.

"Of course. The superintendent only asked us to capture her and did not say anything about how to deal with her afterwards. Personally, the only thing I can't tolerate is her harming innocent people."

"Yes... That's definitely no good. I still can't believe it, why Sovereignty would do that kind of thing..."

"Naturally it's because of the curse? Even if we catch her, it's not like she can stop just because we tell her to."

Fear explained matter-of-factly.

"So... Suppose, I'm saying suppose, once Sovereignty is found, is there no choice but to keep her in Haruaki-kun's home to stop her from causing trouble

to others? Haruaki-kun, curses don't affect you, right?"

This was the root of the problem this time. If it were a curse that affected the "owner," then once Haruaki became the "owner" there would be no trouble for anyone. However, there existed extremely rare types of cursed tools that "indiscriminately affected everyone in the vicinity"—stones that brought discomfort to nearby people simply by existing, or dolls that wandered every night and attacked people—if this was the case, then changing owners would not work. After this was explained—

"Even if curses don't affect you, they will still affect others, right? Do you keep any of that type of tool in your house?"

"Yes, not many, but there are some of that type which have been sent to my home. In those cases... Pops keeps them in a special location, the storeroom in the depths of the basement. However..."

Haruaki sighed. Indeed, even if a curse targeted people nearby, harm could be minimized by locking the tool away in the basement—that said, it was not a solution Haruaki could agree with wholeheartedly.

"This is, however, the first time for me to encounter a tool with human form that bears that type of curse. I can't really bring myself to lock away for years in a basement a tool which has self-awareness and lives like a human—What's with that look, Fear?"

"S-Shut up, nothing! Hmph... If you actually did that, you'd really be in trouble..."

Muttering, Fear turned her face away, leaned back on the bench and closed her eyes.

"Fundamentally, we all wish to lift our curses. Take me for example—if the curse can be lifted without causing any trouble to others, even if it meant imprisonment, I'd make the sacrifice. But of course, I wouldn't be pleased about it."

Opening one eye, she glanced at Haruaki—

"On further thought, I think the problem is that the doll is not aware of the fact that 'there are ways to lift curses,' right? She is currently running away

because she believes she will be locked up or destroyed once she is captured."

"Same here, before I learned about you guys, that's what I thought so too... So that must be what she believes."

Shiraho chattered softly as if talking to herself.

"In any case, she must go to Haruaki-kun's home in order to avoid causing trouble to others. So I must tell her this... Then only later on, I could ask her if she wishes to return to my place or not."

"You're really okay with that? Didn't you come to school for the purpose of bringing her home?"

Gazing into the distance, Shiraho answered with a smile:

"...Yes. My wish is just willfulness, and furthermore, harming innocent people is definitely unacceptable. So long as she returns to me after she has been purified of her troublesome curse, that is enough... Besides, it's not like we can't meet while her curse is being lifted, right?"

"Ah... Yes, though you'd only be able to make visits."

"Even so, if Sovereignty agrees then I will endure. Even if we cannot be together, my wish to be her friend does not change."

"I see."

Haruaki sipped coffee from his cup. From his standpoint, that of someone trying to bridge relations between humans and cursed tools, Shiraho's words were truly gratifying.

"I'm already clear on how you feel about that doll—but the most practical issue now is how she feels. Even if she refuses to return home because she is afraid of being destroyed, why would she come to school to absorb life force?"

"Dunno... I dunno, but I feel like... Even though I still see her as a friend, perhaps Sovereignty doesn't feel the same way... That's why she's doing that. Uh, in other words—"

Her voice was filled with sorrow.

"Perhaps she thinks... Humans betrayed her."

As if impatient with the resulting silence, the bell rang inside the school building. With the end of class signaled, the entire world changed with the noise and bustle of after school. From the courtyard, one could see through the windows students cheering up as they rushed out of the classrooms one after another.

Only in the courtyard did the serenity of class time linger. In a mere matter of minutes, that too was lost in the flow of time.

"Next time I see Sovereignty, I wish to apologize to her. Why Sovereignty refuses to come home... Is most likely because what my father did caused her to feel disappointed."

Fear and Haruaki waited silently for Shiraho to continue.

"We used to be friends... Or perhaps that was just my wishful thinking, but I still believe that was what she should have felt in the past. If she carries such an unbearable curse, yet she never absorbed my life force, doesn't that imply Sovereignty is being considerate for my sake and has been stopping herself from absorbing mine?"

"That's true. Maybe for a day or two, but she couldn't possibly have suppressed the curse for half a year. Perhaps in order to avoid harming you no matter what, she went out secretly at night."

"But then she was suddenly stuffed into a suitcase and sent to an unfamiliar location. Believing she was going to be abandoned or destroyed—it is possible she felt disappointed and was convinced that all humans, including me, had betrayed her."

"Disappointed... Eh?"

Fear repeated the word. Mentally, she asked herself.

—Do I feel disappointed in humans? Probably... Not.

Then...

—Did I ever feel disappointed in humans? In that instant, her mind became dominated by dark memories.

The castle lord's laughter. The smell of blood being called an appropriate perfume. Herself as a tool, wishing for what should not be wished. Listening to shouts that were not screams, a cube had no ears that could be covered. Fallen in a corner wishing to be picked up but no one extended a hand. Before she knew it, she had transformed from a lone object to a solitary person. Cold, dark, chilling. Ah... As she reached this cemetery of buried thoughts, only meaningless questions surfaced in her mind like tombstones.

Why was I created? Why was I cursed? Why was I abandoned?

—Whose fault is it?

(...This only belongs to the past, forget it!)

It was possible to forget. In her heart, there was one image sufficient to dispel this swathe of darkness.

A flashlight illuminating the dungeon, the one whose face she could still see, whose voice she could still hear, the one who was only affected by the curse known as the cold.

Indeed—at this current time and place, I do not feel disappointed.

I believe him.

That is enough.

"In the end, she must have decided humans were not worth caring about, which is why she's doing this... I don't understand why she insists in doing it at school, but—I want to tell her: 'Humans are not all like that. I'm sorry I was unable to stop my father. Please forgive me, for I am weak in many ways.' I want to apologize to her. Rather, I must apologize no matter what."

Shiraho's voice brought Fear back from her thoughts.

"Really? So ultimately, you just want to save her, right?"

"I don't have the power to help her. But because she is my friend, I must..."

Sovereignty Perfection Doll—the above-named doll was very disappointed in humans. Just like Fear's past self.

In that case, from that doll's perspective, this girl named Sakuramairi Shiraho

was to her a similar existence as Haruaki and Honatsu was to Fear? People with the power to save cursed tools from their fates.

Hence—

"I promise you. I will find that doll for sure. I will capture her without damaging her and stop her from harming others. And the first I'll do is let you meet her—Don't worry. Just like the superintendent is client number one, you're client number two to me."

"...Right, that's our next step. You've summarized our direction, Fear. Surprisingly, good job!"

"Mmm! Surprisingly is redundant, dummy! Don't go patting my head so casually... Okay..."

Fear reflexively looked up to launch into a tirade, but the sight of Haruaki's expression stopped her impulse.

(This guy... Hmph! That's why he's such a shameless brat, seriously...)

Left with no choice, Fear averted her gaze to find Shiraho smile apologetically:

"Thank you, you two—I'm really sorry for causing so much trouble to you. I'll try to help as much as possible."

"So, a concrete strategy to capture that doll... Of course, I believe she will come again tomorrow so that opportunity must be seized, but we can't give up today yet. Whether or not she was telling truth when she said she'll only absorb life force within the school, it's best to catch her as soon as possible. Do you have any idea where she could be hiding outside of school?"

"Umm... Not really. She only told me before she didn't like crowds."

"That's understandable... Then we'll rule out the possibility of her wandering busy streets overnight or anything of that sort. Places requiring payment such as manga cafes, hotels or family restaurants—what we should be searching are remote unfrequented areas, right? But that's easier said than done, given the massively broad range..."

"Don't give up before we start! You must believe in my intuition!"

Fear's exasperation seemed to be reacting to the shameless brat, as if she was

suppressing the urge to give him a good beating. Just as she was about to put her thoughts into action, Shiraho frantically spoke up:

"I-I will try my best to help! Maybe we can search separately? I'll look in my neighborhood while you guys take care of the school's surroundings?"

"Yeah, but who knows how close to the school that doll will hide herself. Then we'll rely on you for the neighboring town. Don't do anything too risky, okay?"

Haruaki answered Shiraho gently, causing Fear to feel like hitting him even more.

"Also, are you coming to school tomorrow?"

"Yes, if we don't find Sovereignty outside, we must stop her here. Uh... Why are you asking anyway?"

"No... Because you've been umm, absent all this time, I was wondering if you might have certain difficulties... If you need any help, we will try our best to assist you, so don't be shy. You can talk to us whenever you want."

"T-Thanks. You're right, since my father is gone... Once Sovereignty's issue is handled, I must pull myself together—ehehe. Haruaki-kun, you're so gentle."

Faced with her smile, Haruaki shyly scratched his head.

"It's not like I'm really gentle... How should I put this? I'm the type who can't resist helping those who are trying hard. In any case, don't think too much of it... Woah! Hey Fear! Why did you sock me in the gut!?"

"Hmph... Just as you advised earlier, I'm picking up on cues!"

"That's not what you're doing!"

While they were quarreling, the number of students walking through the courtyard increased. This was apparently a shortcut en route to club activities. Since it was pointless to continue chatting idly on the bench, Haruaki's group decided to part ways and expand the search to outside of school.

"Ah, there's still a bit left, let me finish it in one go! Gulp gulp..."

Watching Shiraho pour juice into her mouth from the side, Fear got up from the bench.

"Okay, let's go back to the classroom to get our bags. Hmm? Haruaki, why are you making that strange face?"

"No, I keep getting the feeling I'm forgetting something—what is it?"

"...How odd, I have the same feeling too. By the way, didn't that thing in your pocket make noises repeatedly starting a while ago?"

"Eh? Oh, it's a text message. Let me check... Oh no!"

Haruaki suddenly cried out. Thinking something disastrous happened, Fear moved over to glance at Haruaki's hand, only to find several sentences on the screen—

'How's the situation? Nothing unusual on my side.'

'You didn't respond. I am very worried but I can't leave my post. I have no choice but to keep monitoring.'

'Did something happen?'

'Nothing unusual has happened even after school. The number of people leaving are increasing. How much longer do I have to monitor the entrance?'

'Response please💀'

"Oh no, I completely forgot!"

"What's that skull symbol at the end? It looks kind of scary."

"Something like 'I'm dead tired from all this monitoring,' possibly? At least, that's what I sincerely hope...!"

"Maybe she means 'I'm gonna kill you' instead...?"

The two swallowed hard as they continued reading, but Shiraho suddenly screamed.

"Hyaaah!?"

"W-What happened?"

"Ooh... I was drinking too fast, the i-ice fell... into my uniform..."

Fear turned around to find Shiraho frowning and twisting her body, pulling up the front of her uniform where the ice cubes had fallen into. Then she curled up

the shirt and started fanning her clothes as she yelled "Hey! Hey!" with a serious expression. The ice cubes immediately fell out but unbeknownst to Shiraho who continued her motions—exposing her snow-white abdomen and navel which flashed in and out of view (mildly moistened by the ice). Decidedly, this was an extremely bad influence in the shameless brat's education. This girl's airheaded behavior was fast becoming quite threatening.

As a mysterious scratching was heard from behind, there was a very ominous feeling. Before Fear and Haruaki turned around, they instinctively glanced at the cellphone display. The final text message read: 'Given the circumstances, she won't be leaving through the school gates. I'm going to look for you guys since I'm worried, Haruaki-kun💀'—The ominous feeling intensified.

Bracing themselves, they turned around.

Fear and Haruaki were standing side by side to look at the cellphone while Shiraho was in front, exposing her belly. A pair of glazed eyes was glaring at them—eyes filled with contempt.

"...I came running out of worry, and... Everyone turns out to be having fun...?"



At the entryway connecting the courtyard to the school building, a bespectacled girl extended her upper torso forward, giving off an eerie aura like some kind of psychic phenomenon, her hand scratching against the surface of the door.

Part 4

"Let's go! Hurry and start searching, we have to catch her! Go—!"

"Hey!"

Fear was about to dash off as soon as they exited the school gates when Haruaki hastily grabbed her by the collar and stopped her by force. Predicatably, Fear protested "Hey, what are you doing!? I'll curse you!" as she made strange noises.

"Well, let's confirm first, what we just discussed with Konoha... Do you still intend to search alone?"

Konoha was currently not present. After they had bidden Shiraho goodbye and apologized to Konoha to appease her displeasure and were about to leave, Konoha remembered she still had duties at the library committee. Although she said it was fine to skip them, she ultimately decided to attend to them. This was the result of Haruaki's persuasion: "I remember you also skipped last time as well? Skipping twice in a row would place you in quite an embarrassing predicament!"—as well as Fear's remark: "I don't need your help. You can go wherever you want—Shoo! Shoo!"

"Of course! I already said I'll resolve this incident by myself! R-Right, I almost forgot, I don't need you to help either..."

"But just now when Shiraho and I accompanied you to search the school building, you didn't complain?"

Mmm—Fear whined softly and stepped back.

"That was—j-just a natural development, going with the flow!"

"In other words, even if I'm around, you don't find me obtrusive, right? In that case, then it should be okay for us to continue acting together, right? Besides, I'm not going to get in your way... Right, let's do it this way! You will be in

charge of the matter, so I'm just an extra to support you, as if I'm your assistant. Does that work?"

"Hmm. Assistant... eh?"

Fear seemed to be considering something. Muttering for a while, she finally looked up at Haruaki, who then responded with a fake smile that seemed to say "I want to work for you," causing Fear to pout and avert her gaze. Then— "Well... Umm, if you must help no matter what, it's not like I won't consider accepting it."

"Okay, boss! Thank you for hiring me!"

"Very well, assistant, let's move out immediately! Hoho, you have to be obedient like a dog!"

"First of all, as your assistant, I have a suggestion. Please don't wander around carelessly or else you'll get lost, shiny silvery little lady."

"Arrgggh! Hey—! What is with you this time? Has your fetish for strangling girl awakened!?"

While he used his hands in place of a leash to capture the struggling boss by her collar, Haruaki thought to himself.

Even though Fear did not understand how challenging it was to find Sovereignty, it did not imply she was taking things lightly. She definitely wanted to accomplish the task, but having declared she would succeed alone she did not want to rely on others. With respect to her dilemma, accepting Haruaki as her assistant was probably the result of a compromise— (Whatever. From my standpoint, as long as this little lady lacking in common sense is kept under control, it doesn't really matter.) If the only price to pay was simply playing such a role, it would be truly a bargain.

Several hours later—it was evening with the sun almost completely set.

"Still can't find her..."

Hoo—sighing, Fear straightened her back as she looked down from atop a bridge.

"Haruaki, next location!"

"Yeah... I remember there's a park, there should be many hiding places there."

Then let's search it—Fear started moving as if trying to chase after her lengthening shadow. Naturally, Haruaki followed along. Their search had failed to yield a single clue. To be honest, with "no crowds" as the only hint, the chances of finding Sovereignty were really too low—but they could not accept inaction. Since it was imperative to find her as soon as possible, the thought of any possible location was enough to rouse them into action.

A glance at Fear's profile would show sweat gliding across her cheeks beneath the setting sun. Haruaki was naturally in a similar state because they had been running without pause.

"Shouldn't we take a break?"

Without looking back, she replied:

"Not needed."

"Whether studying or exercising, a suitable amount of rest helps efficiency, you know?"

"This is neither studying nor exercising, but work—no, it's a mission."

Indeed, a sense of mission was what her sincere expression displayed.

Hence Haruaki did not say anything more. After all, the first person to fall from exhaustion would be himself rather than Fear; but somehow, compared to her stern expression, the importance of his own stamina seemed much less urgent.

Sigh... Haruaki secretly shrugged. But Fear's steps suddenly stopped.

Glaring severely, she pointed her finger towards the side. Did she find Sovereignty? —Haruaki hastily looked at where she was pointing.

"Pearl barley tea."

Pointing at the vending machine, she uttered this term.

"What?"

"Taking the extract of pearls and mixed with barley, this tea sure is avant-garde... Your boss is very curious. Assistant, I order you to buy me that! Also, you get yourself something to drink too! Rest aside, replenishing moisture is very important. If you were to collapse on the road, I'd be very troubled—Not! But, uh... It'd cause trouble for others."

Expressing a different meaning this time, Haruaki shrugged again.

"...Understood."

Drinking the tea bought from the vending machine, they continued on their search.

Parks, quiet Shinto shrines, little forests, abandoned factories, junkyards with mountains of scrapped automobiles, dead space between mansions... Spending hours, they searched every uninhabited place they could think of.

"...Still can't find her."

Fear seemed quite depressed, having repeated that line for who knows how many times today. This was the conclusion.

"Not that easy to succeed, right... Perhaps Shiraho's search in her part of town is the same. Ultimately, there are too many possible places. Not succeeding is a shame, but don't be too depressed."

"Mmm..."

"Konoha should probably be back home by now? Anyway, let's end the search for today."

Haruaki checked the time on his cellphone. But Fear raised her head and gazed at the dark sky with an ambiguous expression, refusing to move.

"But... I still—"

"I know you want to find her; I want to continue searching too. But we have to go to school tomorrow—and perhaps Sovereignty will be at school again. If we spend the night searching and collapse the next morning, then it's futile, right? Borrowing Class Rep's catchphrase, it'd be absolutely ridiculous."

After a while, the silver head finally nodded and she began walking at a pace much slower than when she was searching for Sovereignty.

The side view of her face truly showed dejection.

Unbelievably, whenever Fear was in low spirits, Haruaki felt uncomfortable all over.

As a result, after walking for a while, Haruaki spoke up as if suddenly remembering something: "By the way, the fridge is empty, let's go to the supermarket along the way!"

"What a pain. Weren't we hurrying home to rest?"

"Hmm, if you really want to go home first, that's fine... But are you really okay with it?"

"Am I okay with what? ...What do you mean?"

In response to Fear's skeptical gaze, Haruaki simply uttered a simple line. This sentence might be ineffective on others, but to this little lady, it was akin to a HP recovery spell.

"Supermarkets carry lots of rice crackers!"

Part 5

"Uehehehehehe... Wooh!"

"Hey! You're scary when you're acting all high instead!"

They had arrived at the supermarket and was currently at the rice cracker section. Haruaki had asked Fear to choose two bags—one to offer to guests as snacks and one for herself, but who knew if she was listening as she gazed at the rows of rice cracker laden shelves, muttering to herself: "Sesame... No no, soy sauce... Ufufufu..." Occasionally she would go "meow~" as she twisted the corners of her mouth. Quite a terrifying sight indeed.

"Hmm, hey! Haruaki, what's this white one that looks soft and puffy?"

"The okaki rice cake? That's the rice cracker's friend. With savory black beans inside, they're quite tasty."

"What!? Then I'll need to add it to the candidate list... Hmm, how troubling..."

In the end, she selected one bag of black bean okaki and one bag of soy sauce rice crackers. Although Haruaki had asked her to choose two bags based on their purpose, it did not really matter because ultimately the vast majority of rice crackers at home were going to end up in the same stomach.

Not only was Fear's HP gauge restored, she was also sent into a berserk state, screaming at the rice cracker shelves as soon as they entered the supermarket. Once she finally calmed down, it was finally time to begin buying normal groceries.

"So this is the supermarket... Taking a closer look, it's really interesting with so many things I've never seen before."

Fear walked along the aisles, looking all around.

"You'll gradually get used to it. Okay, treat this as a lesson. Why don't you get me a head of cabbage while I go pick the eggplants... You do know what a

cabbage is, right?"

"Don't treat me like an idiot! Of course I know what a cabbage is. Just you wait and see!"

The silver-haired little lady ran noisily towards the vegetable section and happily examined them. When the racks blew out a puff of cold air, she jumped in fright, screamed and began to laugh... As if infected by her mood, Haruaki could feel the corners of his lips relaxing. No particular reason—but let's bring her along again next time, thought Haruaki to himself. In any case, she had clearly recovered her spirits.

Fear immediately came running back.

"Fufu, look at this!"

"Thank you for making such a classic mistake. This is lettuce."

"...Mmm~"

Even though they were similar, the cabbage had a more rugged feeling—after giving her this hint, she got it right. However—

"To tell if a cabbage is fresh or not, you need to look at its core. This one is already darkened, so it's a bit old. Get a new one!"

"How nitpicky. But if it'll be tastier, it can't be helped.

Even if it was nitpicky Haruaki forced her to memorize it. As the master of the dinner table, compromises were unacceptable.

Preparing to go select the meat, he wondered why Fear was not following. Wondering what she was doing, he was surprised to find—

"Hey, old lady over there. You need to check the cabbage core for freshness. That one is no good, pick this one!"

"Ara ara, why thank you. Even though you're a young foreigner, that's very helpful of you, hoho~"

"Why of course, it would not be wrong to call me the cabbage master. I won't mix it up with lettuce either, because cabbages have a more rugged feel. So, old lady... Hmm? What's up, Haruaki? Why are you showing such a delicate

expression?"

"I was just caught in a dilemma, wondering if I should ridicule you for 'Proudly showing off what you just learnt!' Or 'Be careful or else people might mistake you for a stingy old hag.' Or praise you for 'Doing a good deed'... Whatever, I just said them all out anyway."

"I don't get it. Anyway, it feels great to be thanked by others!"

Words of thanks. Perhaps a single phrase expressing a person's wish was enough to reduce Fear's curse by one ten-thousandth or maybe one billionth. What she had just performed was the first step, one that she needs to repeat over and over from now on, but Fear did not seem to have noticed.

Precisely because she was naturally enjoying the act of helping others, Haruaki believed Fear would absolutely have no problem in the future.

Sooner or later, she would surely lift her curse one day. Arbitrarily creating her and willfully feeling hatred towards her, selfish humans were responsible for everything—the curse conferred upon her.

Suddenly, Haruaki thought of Sovereignty. Her situation was the same. Though he did not know the details, she was also cursed because of humans. And currently, she was disappointed in humans.

If he wished for her to become like Fear, would that simply count as human conceit? This sort of contradiction, was it analogous to a murderer begging for mercy? But deep down, perhaps Fear also—

Even though he trusted her, he could not stop his lips from moving. He must be too weak.

"...Do you like humans?"

"Well enough, so-so."

He could not see her expression. Viewed from behind, she was examining with great curiosity various products displayed on the shelves. The cold air blown from below caused her silver hair to sway slightly. Then she straightened her arched back. Her face still out of view, she held her tiny hands together behind her back—

"—About the same as rice crackers, I suppose."

Saying that, her voice sounded quite gentle.

Part 6

As soon as dinner was finished, Fear started yelling: "Haruaki, bath time! We have to go to bed earlier tonight!" and rushed out of the living room. There was a noisy racket one should not hear from bathroom. Soon after, the noise died down, replaced by the sound of a series of wet footsteps.

"Hey, the shampoo is used up—!"

"Woah! ...Couldn't you at least have dried yourself before coming out?"

Wrapped in a bath towel, Fear made her appearance. Her slender arms, pale shoulders and wet hair were all dripping with water. Haruaki was sipping tea after dinner when the awakening of memories from a few days ago caused him to blush slightly. Nevertheless, Fear did not pay any attention to him—

"I'm in a hurry to sleep so I'm preparing for bedtime with high speed! I must be well-rested and energetic for tomorrow!"

"Somehow it seems like you'll end up more tired from all this tension? Don't you find it counter productive... Oh well whatever."

The incident happened in the next instant. Perhaps it was an inevitable outcome. Indeed, the way Fear had her towel wrapped around her was definitely inadequately secured—

It slipped down. Or rather, it loosened.

"...Oh?"

"Uh!"

As the towel's knot loosened before Haruaki's eyes, the world seemed to move in slow motion. The area of Fear's exposed skin gradually increased as he watched. Pulled by gravity, the top of the towel originally located below her collarbone instantly descended down to her snow-white chest—from between the edges of the loosened towel, glimpses were offered of a moist orifice, the

navel—as the lower edge of the towel gradually spread out, the smooth curves of her inner thigh came clearly into view—then everything—

"Special Move—Immorality Blocker (Visual Variant)!"

"Owwwwwwwwww! Wait a minute, Konoha, my eyes are going to be gouged out!"

Konoha, who had been sitting beside him enjoying her tea, instantly blocked Haruaki's gaze with fearsome god-like speed. Fortunately, this prevented him from seeing anything fatal. But her movements were so forceful that it made Haruaki wonder if she might imbue her hands with a sword's sharpness at any point, so it was quite scary. Listening, Haruaki could hear the sound of Fear frantically tightening her bath towel.

"Oooh, haha... Mmm. Finally a good deed from the Cow Tits."

"Thank you for the compliment. By the way, you should be able to find the replacement shampoo underneath the sink, Fear."

"Oh really!? You should have told me earlier!"

Fear hurried back to the bathroom. Only then was the visual obstruction removed from Haruaki's view. As he rubbed his stinging eyes, he could not help but ask Konoha:

"I'm just curious... Is there a olfactory variant?"

Smiling while presenting him the back of her hand, Konoha shoved two fingers upwards. His spine shivering, Haruaki resolved to forget all about this.

"...Anyway, where was our discussion before we were interrupted?"

"Yes—about after school, what happened after you two parted ways with me... In the end, you didn't find anything out in the streets, right?"

Right. Calming their thoughts, the two of them continued pooling their information.

"Yes. But I don't think it was completely fruitless."

"How so?"

"I can't say for certain, but there didn't seem to be anyone fainting on the

streets, nor was there any sound of ambulances... That doll really stuck to her word and did not cause trouble outside."

"I see, confirming this point is comforting despite the overall crisis. However —"

As if piercing the bottom of the cup with her gaze, Konoha narrowed her eyes.

"Indeed, if that doll was not lying then she'll 'be back to absorb life force in this school again.' We need to come up with a plan."

"I agree, but I still don't understand why she's doing this."

"Her curse can't possibly be as specific as 'can only absorb the life force of students wearing the Taishyuu High School uniform"... There's no point in pondering any further what cannot be understood. The issue at hand is what we should do tomorrow."

By their estimates, Sovereignty was not going to intrude into the classrooms during lessons. Instead, she should be targeting times like the lunch break when students moved about alone.

"In that case, skipping a day of classes would be kind of meaningless. At least, that's what I'd like to think."

"Skipping classes would be asking to get scolded for sure. Besides, we already skipped the afternoon periods today."

Right—as Haruaki nodded in agreement, he recalled Kirika's gaze when he had happened to run into her in the classroom to get his bag—truly like a class representative, she glared severely at him for inappropriate behavior. At the time, Haruaki had swiftly escaped from the classroom together with Fear, but if they were to skip class again, retribution surely awaited them like some sort of vengeful ghost. Truly too frightening. Haruaki did not want to imagine the consequences.

"Then how about we patrol during break times outside of class?"

"Yes. Of course, I'll help too... Ah, correction. Starting tomorrow, I will try taking walks around the school during break times as a way to relieve stress. Perhaps I might end up running into someone suspicious!"

Konoha grinned mischievously, eliciting a wry smile from Haruaki.

"Not helping Fear deliberately, is that right... Because that girl is really stubborn."

"That's the way she is from the start so it's nothing surprising. She's enthusiastic to help others because she's really eager to lift her curse. In any case, I will respect her wish for a few days."

"As expected of someone who's been through the same path, you're really understanding. Next... We should find Zenon-san in the morning to report to her and request her assistance. For this time and age, our school's security happens to be quite lax, like a sieve... That said, I'm not going so far as to ask her for armed guards stationed within one meter around the school perimeter."

"If it's too conspicuous, alerting the masses would be a big problem too... Oh yeah, let me brew some more tea?"

"No thanks, I'm planning on retiring early for the night, so you don't have to —"

"Don't be modest. Besides, I still have more to say."

Saying that, Konoha went to the kitchen to replenish the boiling water. When she returned to the living, there was a smile on her face for some reason.

"Well then, Haruaki-kun."

"W-What is it?"

Haruaki instinctively shrank back. His intuition alerted him that Konoha's smiling appearance presented some sort of danger.

"I had some free time earlier so I asked Fear about the details of what happened during the day. Namely, how you forgot about me completely and shared juice with those girls to enjoy yourselves."

"Umm... I-I already apologized to you about that, right? Haven't I?"

"Because there are still a lot of details to be cleared up. Let's see? When Shiraho's uniform was drenched by the water cooler, you kept staring? When descending the stairs, you were eyeing for an opportunity to get intimate with her? Furthermore, you were very concerned about her skirt fluttering in the

wind, with constant furtive glances. As soon as an opportunity presented itself, you seized it to embrace Shiraho in excitement—how utterly terrible and unacceptable, do you not agree? Completely indecent."

"Wait a minute, some of that is clearly fabricated!"

"I don't want to hear your excuses. How should I say this? Shiraho is at fault too. Too airheaded, too careless. And seriously, boys are just unbelievable, always staring lewdly at girls at the slightest opportunity..."

That's only possible when girls present the opportunities, right? —Though Haruaki reflexively felt like objecting, he was aware that the earlier claims were true to some extent so he could not protest with a clear conscience. In that case, there was only one solution.

"Ha... Hahaha! Oh my that's really true, I can't believe someone could be that airheaded! It's really troubling, so I'd better get to bed soon! So, goodnight!"

Just as he was about to get up, Konoha grabbed his wrist, preventing him from standing.

"Stay, I still have lots to ask! Haruaki-kun, do you prefer airheaded girls? How do you really feel about her vulnerable lack of awareness? So does that kind of size turn out to be perfectly suited to your tastes?"

...What kind of size did she mean?

Part 7

The next morning, three notices were announced during homeroom. Even though the sports festival was approaching, please do not forget the midterm exams coming up after that. Recently, reports of missing belongings have increased, so please take care of valuables.

Finally—there have been increased cases of people not feeling well and fainting. Please be sure to have three regular meals and adequate sleep.

Correct and meaningless warnings.

In the few spare minutes after homeroom, the class was in a noisy state of commotion.

Amidst this chaos, Fear was sitting at her seat, her face tense, arms crossed. Over on the side, Haruaki was sprawled over his desk, sleeping like the dead. Early this morning he had also seemed quite tired as if he had experienced some kind of exhausting night—apparently an impeachment trial? Serves him right.

"..."

Busily drumming away at the desk, Fear's fingers moved rhythmically.

To be honest, she was quite anxious.

Who knew when the doll would arrive? If she could, she wanted to go out and patrol as much as possible. However, there was little chance of the doll causing trouble in class; besides, skipping a whole day of lessons on her second day would be a huge a problem—particularly when she already had the precedent of skipping the periods after lunch on the first day.

In the end, meaningful patrolling could only be undertaken during breaks. Although the current time also counted as a break, there was too little time if she wanted to leave the school building.

(Time eh...)

She recalled the curse she carried—as well as past days when she had been disappointed in humans.

Harming others due to being cursed. This was a point of commonality all tools shared, whether dolls or torture equipment.

And now, Sovereignty Perfection Doll was currently stuck in a period of hopeless despair.

Such thoughts ran through her mind.

It was conceivable. Cursing her own curse, troubled by her inability to resist the impulse. Ruminating in her mind, born as a simple tool to be used according to human wishes, how did she turn out like this? To be able to go back to an unthinking tool, how happy would that be? However, a sense of self-awareness could not allow that. Having tasted the joy of being used by humans, contradictory feelings became rooted in one's heart.

That's right, it was conceivable—After all, Fear had gone through the same feelings in the past.

She was a tool whose existence persisted only to harm others. Alone, she was unable to subvert this truth of the matter. Like a branding iron, like an execution stake, like the spikes of an iron maiden, self-reproach and suffering were continually imposed upon herself. Until her salvation brought upon by others, this period of torment simply seemed to stretch endlessly—

Ah yes... Fear wanted to save Sovereignty as soon as possible. Not a moment to lose, as quickly as possible.

Hence—if only she could have told this to her past self as well.

(Shiraho and Haruaki... In order to save you, they are waiting for you.)

Not a moment to lose.

Anxiously, Fear wanted to locate Sovereignty.

Hurry and flow faster, time! Let class end faster! Hurry and appear before me, doll! Fear perked up her ears, trying to listen for screams and commotions. If anything happened, she was going to abandon class. Ah... How unbearable—

"Fear-chan, good morning~!"

"You look kind of tired, didn't you sleep well last night? Were you watching late night television?"

"Yeah, you were missing after lunch yesterday? Same with Yachi-kun. Recently there's been lots of people fainting, were you guys one of them, Fear-chan? Are you feeling okay?"

Several of the girls in the class had surrounded Fear's desk. She had only chatted with them a little yesterday and they had not mentioned their names again. To be honest, Fear could not remember their names.

"..."

I'm trying to listen carefully here, what are you girls chattering about—Fear could not help but frown. It was a miracle that she was not clicking her tongue disapprovingly. The girls also seemed to notice something different about Fear's demeanor and looked at each other with surprise.

"No... Yesterday—because there were still some remaining procedures to handle for enrollment, I was tied up with that. Haruaki was helping me as well. We're not unwell at all. Also, I didn't watch television yesterday and went to bed early. So what's up?"

"R-Really? Nothing much, I noticed you had your eyes closed, so I wanted to ask if you were sleepy..."

"Speaking of sleepy, isn't Yachi-kun dozing away all this time? Uwah, could something have happened last night...?"

One of the girls seemed to be actively trying to dispel the subtle atmosphere and forcing herself to sound cheerful. Then the other girls gathered together, elbowing each other in the ribs and started to talk:

"What what? That's so dirty, you perverted girl. You're not thinking about that 'sudden rendezvous theory,' are you? Though I'm the one who proposed the theory first."

"It can't be happening, right? What about that girl from Third Class—Muramasa-san? Doesn't she live with Yachi-kun too?"

"T-That girl hates to be called by her family name, you'd better watch out~"

"How strange. I mean, even though she's supposed to be cousins with Yachikun, her attitude towards him is a bit alarming... What do you think, Fear-chan?"

Fear decided she had to respond to these girls in order to avoid them from troubling her after class. After all, she could not go anywhere right now anyway. The most reliable method would be the Japanese solution—a polite smile.

"How should I put it... Sorry, I'm not too sure. In any case, I don't know that much about Cow Tits."

"Cow... Uwah, somehow I can't really disagree. Are you two really not getting along?"

"...We don't. Whether in body size or behavior, she is an affront to the eyes. Given a chance, she's always creating a shameless atmosphere around Haruaki. How should I say it? We are biologically incompatible."

Suddenly, Fear noticed the girls were for some reason snickering to themselves and exchanging knowing looks.

"Could this be... A love triangle?"

"Looks like it, very much. I feel like I've discovered an unexpected bomb, things have become so interesting!"

"Fear-chan, let me give you some good news, okay? That's definitely not biological incompatibility but a woman's instincts...!"

"...? I don't get what you're saying. What are you referring to a woman's instincts?"

Fear's serious question made the crowd even more excited.

"You're the oblivious participant type! Oh no, Fear-chan is so cute!"

"Well, it's possible she doesn't get it only because we're talking in Japanese."

"Excuse me... Sorry to interrupt your conversation, umm..."

"After all, foreigners are supposed to have their first experiences very early. But Fear-chan gives off an impression like a inexperienced sheltered virgin, so

maybe she really doesn't understand. Yes, this must be a natural monument, one that must be preserved!"

"...Please, girls... Excuse me..."

"Immature love yet to blossom. Once she realizes the love in her heart, the girl will become self-aware as a woman!"

"Ahaha, you're reminding me of bittersweet memories. Ah, how nostalgic."

Fear tilted her head in amazed puzzlement.

What was love?

A concept unknown to her, she must surely learn about it. But just as Fear was about to consult them for further details, the girl seated diagonally behind Fear—Kirika sighed lightly and stood up.

"Shouldn't you people pay slightly more attention to your surroundings?"

"Eh? What's up, Class Rep? Wah! Himura-sensei!"

"Finally, they realized my presence... Thank you for your help..."

Standing on the side was a gloomy looking man—Himura Sunao, the mathematics teacher. His expression was obscured by his extremely long bangs and his mumbling voice always lacked presence.

"So... Class is starting..."

"Ah yes, sorry!"

The girls obediently returned to their seats. "Despite his gloomy demeanor, he's not bad looking—that's the girls' general opinion of him, hence his popularity is average." Fear recalled Haruaki's words from yesterday. He had also told her that this man had nicknames like ghost or the negative energy drain man.

"By the way, Fear-kun, as the class representative I'd like to make a request. Could you move back a bit, closer to me?"

"Hmm?"

Fear did not understand but did as Kirika told. Immediately, an elastic band flew across Fear's face and struck her neighbor, Haruaki, squarely in the head.

"Ouch! W-What the heck? Did a homerun come flying?"

"Uh.... Excuse me, Class Rep, could you give the orders..."

"—Stand up. Bow. Sit down."

The sound of chairs scraping against the floor filled the room as Haruaki watched in puzzlement. But soon after, he dozed off again.

Somehow, Fear felt like she could hear Kirika murmur in a barely audible voice: "Are you sure you guys really didn't do anything strange last night...?"

Part 8

The culprit always returns to the scene of the crime. This was someone's famous quote.

In the corridor outside the dressmaking room, Fear stood alone in high spirits, head held up high. This was only a ten-minute break between classes, so she chose to focus on monitoring this spot instead of wandering around purposelessly.

Even though this part of the school was less frequented, it was not entirely unvisited. Whenever footsteps approached, Fear went into a battle-ready stance to cast a sharp gaze at the direction of the sound.

Glare.

"Uwah!"

Severe glare.

"F-Forgive me! I wasn't planning on chatting you up!"

Vicious stare.

"...Good morning, Fear-sama."

"Hmm, you're the secretary from yesterday."

Appearing without any warning, Zenon greeted normally as if making a statement about a secretary's proper attitude. She was expressionless as usual —though there was something different about her today, a strange object worn on her head.

"What are you doing?"

"Nothing much, just sticking this up. Because of a lack of manpower."

Zenon stuck a sheet of paper with the words "Renovation in progress, entry prohibited" on the door of the dressmaking room. Then she took out from her

pocket a device that resembled a tiny notebook. "Dressmaking room notice is done, now waiting for the contractor's contact..." was what she muttered as she operated the device in her hands. Watching her poking with a pen, it really seemed like a real notepad. How amazing.

"How are things going?"

"Still in progress. How about your side? Did Haruaki ask you for help?"

"Yes. We have stationed personnel at the school gates and various points around the perimeter to be on alert in case she decides to invade the school directly—But we don't have that many security guards in the first place, so the coverage isn't perfect. I will help out later as well."

"...I see. So that's why you're wearing that on your head?"

"Ultraviolet light is a type of slow-acting death ray."

Fear skeptically eyed the straw hat sitting atop the secretary's head. It seemed a poor match for her cool beauty demeanor and business attire. Combined with the cute bear design woven delicately on the hat, it was like seeing a Greek statue holding a teddy bear in its arms, even to the point of desecration in a certain sense, completely dissonant—even though it would be an adorable accessory on any other person.

"Due to the suddenness of the incident, we are unable to increase the number of guards immediately... I am really sorry that these conditions will persist a while longer. As soon as the superintendent returns, I plan on suggesting to him that security cameras be installed to prevent intruders."

"I'm not hoping for an airtight defensive net. Anyway, the enemy is not human so a perfect defense is impossible. You guys only need to make it easier for me to catch her and that'd be enough."

Also—Fear scratched her face awkwardly:

"Like helping out the same way you did with this classroom. Though it's not like we intentionally damaged the facilities."

"No problem at all. After all, the repairs came out of the superintendent's own pocket."

A firm and distinct answer.

"R-Really? Anyway, just leave the school building to me. I will catch her for sure."

"Good, I look forward to your success—Well then, please take care."

Bowing respectfully, Zenon left. As she watched the cute bear straw hat disappear from the other end of the corridor, Fear patted her cheeks as if rousing her spirits.

"Looking forward eh... Yes! I must do my best!"

This could very well be the first time anyone expressed expectations of Fear. With increased concentration, she monitored the corridor. Once again, footsteps were heard. Was the doll finally here? Fear braced herself for combat —

"Ah! ...Hmm? Fear-chan?"

The one frightened by Fear's gaze was a fellow classmate. One of those girls who were chatting with her this morning.

"...What are you doing here?"

"Looking for someone suspicious."

"R-Really? I'm just here to hand this printout to the teacher..."

"Oh? Beware of suspicious people."

Although Fear spoke with complete seriousness, for some reason, the girl waved lightly and walked past with a snicker. Why is she laughing at me—just as Fear wondered in puzzlement, another student appeared. Reflexively, Fear glared at the new arrival as usual, eliciting an "Eek!" response in return. Is that a scream? It's almost like I'm the one scaring people—

"Ah...? C-Could it be... I'm the one acting the most suspicious here?"

Shock.

Finally realizing why she was being laughed at, she slumped her shoulders in dejected shame.

Standing in the very center of the corridor was a poor idea? Should she hide

in a corner to watch secretly instead? Just as she was moving towards the staircase, she carelessly looked out the window—

"Hmm?"

Beneath the window was the narrow space between the school building and the outer wall. In other words, the back of the school building. There was not supposed to be anyone there.

There were two figures superimposed at a spot closer to the school building. One was lying on the ground while the other was riding on top of the first. Based on the hair length, the one on top should be a girl—

Fear stopped to think and made sure there was no one was around her. Hand in her pocket, she confirmed the touch of the Rubik's cube.

At the same time, her other hand automatically opened the window.

In the blink of an eye, she had already leaped into midair.

"!"

Landing behind the figure, she made footprints on this poorly sunlit ground. This must have been due to the soil being moist, definitely not because she was too heavy.

"What are you doing! Stop what... you're doing...?"

"Oh no, don't kiss me in that spot, someone might see~"

"What's wrong even if someone sees—Hmm? Who are you?"

Indeed, a girl was riding a boy. Only that this was not the life force sucking that Fear imagined... Though in a different sense, this did count as a type of life force sucking...

(T-Truly shameless, these people...!)

More accurately, they were simply embraced together. The boy was sitting on the ground while the girl sat on his thighs. Their faces almost touching, their chests were pressed tightly together. For some reason, Fear could feel her cheeks rising rapidly in temperature.

"Fuah... Pah..."

How long did you stand there for? Could you not tell on us to the teacher? Are you a foreign student? —Saying that, the lovers separated from each other. There's no reason for me to publicize this kind of thing anyway, right?

"Why are you doing things that are causing misunderstandings!? What are you doing at this time of the day!? Are you dummies? Know some shame!"

On the other hand, Fear was the one who felt embarrassed. It was only fortunate that she did not transform the Rubik's cube and no one saw her jumping down from the window. What utter embarrassment and a huge misunderstanding.

As if trying to hide her increasingly reddening face, she walked away with long strides.

"I-I can't believe there exists people who engage in such shameless behavior in school... No, now is not the time to be impressed. Now that I know that this kind of behavior actually exists... That's right, this means it is more likely for Haruaki and Cow Tits to be doing something shameless together... I have to pay more attention from now on!"

Muttering, she stepped into the science building and climbed up the stairs.

"But break time is almost over... I guess I'll have to wait until next time to catch that doll. And I can't be sure she'll come either—no, she will definitely come. Let's not underestimate my intuition, hmph."

Just as she turned the corner and stepped into the corridor—

She discovered the classmate she had just parted with earlier.

The doll had been here.

Part 9

The voice of the elderly teacher, whose age approached retirement, sounded like a lullaby. The subject he taught was classics, a casual relaxing class where students were free to doze off or do things secretly under the desk. Even so, the classroom was currently filled with an atmosphere of unease. Students were whispering and passing notes, sending text messages under their desks... Even if he did not intentionally pay attention to them, these sights and sounds naturally reached Haruaki.

(Two days in a row... It's inevitable that the students would begin speculating on the causes.)

Of course, the public explanation was heat stroke, anemia, etc occurring two days in a row by coincidence. Naturally, the doctor's diagnosis was only "fainted from exhaustion due to unknown reasons." Overhearing the conversations of classmates who had visited the victims, Haruaki learned that some of them had already recovered enough to get out of bed and talk. In a few days, all of them should recover substantial mobility. As a side note, it seemed like no one remembered what occurred immediately before they fainted.

For there to be almost ten victims in a mere span of two days, it was impossible for people not to be suspicious. A psychopath roaming around with chloroform, the work of ghosts, a gas leak somewhere, baseless rumors were beginning to spread out of control in the classroom.

In particular—there was the first occurrence of a victim from this class.

Haruaki stole a glance at his neighbor beside him. Rather than holding her pen ready to write, the silver-haired girl was blankly staring down at the empty page of her notebook.

She had returned to this period several dozen minutes late. Pointing to an empty seat in the classroom, she explained: "...I was taking this guy to the

infirmity." Haruaki already knew what was going on. The other students also seemed to realize something had happened. Through the exchange of messages with students from other classes, news of other victims immediately spread throughout the class—"Surely something suspicious is going on?" That was the current mood in the classroom.

Haruaki felt the same and was in no mood to pay attention to lessons calmly. But suddenly rushing out of the room would be too conspicuous, as if announcing to everyone else "I am involved in the incident." Besides, Fear must have returned to the classroom only after attempting a fruitless search.

(Damn it...)

Haruaki clenched his fist beneath his desk. Obviously, Haruaki had also been patrolling the school building during breaks. Likewise for Konoha. In consideration of Fear's pride, neither of them did it conspicuously, but in the end, they still took precautions separately.

However—They had failed to prevent further victims. When clearly they were the only ones in a position to do so given their knowledge of the situation.

His heart stung with regret and a sense of ineptitude.

Most likely, the silver-haired girl sitting on the neighboring seat felt the same.

(What... Exactly am I doing?)

While she was occupied with that misunderstanding, distracted by that kind of tangent, the doll had seized the opportunity to strike.

Letting the doll roam free to commit crimes, causing a person whom she had just been talking with mere minutes ago to become a victim—indeed, mere minutes ago. This particular point felt most regretful.

The bell rang for the end of period. A hustling and bustling break time—the contradictory concept that is quiet tumult.

Her skin felt gazes belonging to no one in particular. Her ears heard whispers belonging to no one in particular.

If only you had kept your act together, she would have been safe—Fear felt

such reproach directed towards herself. But it was just a feeling. The gazes were only what she imagined in others and the whispers were only noises her own ears created deliberately. No one was paying particular attention to her. Nevertheless—

"..."

She got up from her seat and went out to the corridor. Even though Haruaki turned to look at her a few times, Fear did not feel like talking to him at this time. Even though she knew it would have been better to say something.

Of course, she did not find the doll either after that. Today's crimes were either finished or perhaps she was waiting for another opportunity to strike—Fear could not know for sure. But even so, she could not abandon searching for the doll. Even though she did not have a destination in mind, Fear felt compelled to visit unfrequented locations.

Indeed, she had no destination in mind. Perhaps the doll was still in school, but she could also have gone outside already. As things stood, things were repeating just like yesterday—no, since victims were increasing, it was getting worse. What a powerless girl she was, unable to stop the situation from worsening...

Involuntarily, she sighed and hung her head. At this time—"Poof!" She found her face buried in something.

"...Hmm?"

"Gyah! Ah, it's you, Fear-chan... A-Are you okay? Your face doesn't look too amazing, you know?"

Fear had buried herself into Shiraho's bosom. Her friendly smile felt dazzling. The feeling of self-torture further increased. Fear twisted her lips and went "Heh!" Slightly trying to escape reality, she said softly to the person before her:

"Fuu~... Speaking of amazing, this part of yours is quite amazing. Doesn't quite match up to Cow Tits, but still. Ah, but mine are completely no good..."

"I-If you keep talking there, it really tickles!?"

"Ahahahahahahaha."

"And laughing dryly at me is also very scary! Uh... Starting from now on! Fear-chan's will start growing from now on!"

"I'm not convinced. But how on earth can I reach the same level as average people..."

Fear asked with an exhausted voice.

"Hmm—Well—M-Massage them and they'll grow bigger! I-I worked hard on mine too! Like this!"

Rub rub rub—Shiraho began to massage her breasts with both hands. Fear watched her with initial amazement—

"Wow! I don't know if it's my imagination but they really seem bigger... Let me try too!"

And began massaging her washboard of a chest as well.

Passing male students were shocked by the behavior of these two girls.

"Also, I heard that it's more effective if you let others massage them for you..."

"Okay, massage me! Give and take, I'll help you massage in turn!"

"Hyah! Eh... Really? Are you really sure?"

"...Damn it, yours are so soft and warm. Somehow it fills me with a sense of hate..."

"Hmm... Don't worry, Fear-chan, yours have some substance too... Surely they'll grow from now on."

Another boy walked by. Hakuto Taizou. Seeing two girls in the hallway massaging each other's breasts (and washboard), he was similarly shocked. Then for some reason, he nodded twice or thrice and thanked them: "Thank you for the delicious treat!"



In the end, their strange behavior persisted until Kirika passed by and told them with a blush: "Could you two stop engaging in public indecency in the hallway?"

Returning to normal, Fear accepted Shiraho's invitation to go sit on the same bench in the courtyard they had sat together yesterday. Walking around in such a daze, you won't even find something that was right before your eyes, so why not relax for change of pace? —That was how Shiraho convinced her.

While drinking the cup of juice Shiraho had bought as thanks for treating her yesterday—

"...Are you sure about paying?"

"Ahaha, this is a return favor. I'm treating you today."

Even though they had also wasted money at the vending machine just now, since Shiraho said it was okay, Fear did not let the matter weigh on her mind.

She recalled how Shiraho had forgotten to take out the first cup before pressing the button for the second cup, then entered a state of confused panic as the cup overflowed and spilled... This girl needs to calm down too.

"So, how are you doing? Even though there's not much time left, if you wish, I'll listen to your troubles."

Shiraho spoke with a pure and innocent expression. Once again, Fear felt the dark gloom in her heart decrease.

"Have you heard? Just now, that doll apparently came again."

"Looks like it... Even though I've been patrolling too."

"Despite all these precautions, we still failed to stop or catch her. But I promised you I'd catch her and let you meet her."

Is this why you're depressed? —Fear nodded and replied:

"I want to catch her as early as possible. Before more victims appear—more importantly, it's for her own good."

"For Sovereignty?"

"Yes. She and I are the same, so I understand. Revulsion towards one's cursed

self. The disappointment felt towards humans who cursed us. The regret felt when unable to suppress the curse in spite of everything. Precisely because I understand, I must tell her. The only salvation... Comes with lifting the curse."

Fear downed the remaining juice in one gulp and crushed the paper cup in her hand.

"That doll is most likely in a state of self-abandonment. As a fellow inorganic tool, her senior—perhaps this is a kind of arrogance, but I want to save her. Simply that. Clearly just that, but I can't even achieve it... I'm so useless."

"Awww!"

"Huh!?"

Shiraho suddenly embraced Fear who was sitting beside her. Turning to view Shiraho's face, Fear found her smiling as if something dazzling had entered her view.

"I think it's okay not to be so anxious. If she heard how you felt, I'm sure Sovereignty will be really happy. Of course, as someone who wishes for her happiness, I am very touched as well. That's why I want to thank you."

Fear felt embarrassed. But strangely enough, it did not feel unpleasant at all.

"...However, I sometimes think—I have harmed others in the past as result of my curse, committing irreconcilable mistakes. Am I simply trying to compensate for my irreconcilable crimes—Which is why I want to stop her? Or am I simply taking advantage of her who is of no relation to me, trying to seek absolution for myself on an emotional level perhaps?"

"I don't really understand difficult issues. I only know that you, Fear-chan, care for her sincerely. So that is why I am hugging you. Even if you make such a sad expression, it won't help anything."

Shiraho suddenly smiled cheerfully. She must be similarly troubled over Sovereignty so this was definitely a forced smile. However...

Suddenly, a thought entered Fear's mind. Was forcing a smile actually quite a difficult act? Then forcing herself to smile, Shiraho was actually quite resilient? Even though she was so scatterbrained, she was a human with great strength of

heart—Fear realized for the first time.

Through her heart, this strength was being poured into Fear's. That was what Fear felt.

"Making a sad expression doesn't help anything... That's right. Hoho, indeed it's true."

"You agree?"

"...Okay, enough of rest! I will not give up, definitely, I'll catch that doll!"

Fear suddenly stood up. Perhaps she simply saw things differently, but incredibly, she felt her heart lighten.

"That's the spirit. I will help too!"

"Yes. You're client number two, so that's fine. But if I don't get on the move, that meddlesome Cow Tits will be butting in to hog the spotlight. Now is not the time for me to wallow in melancholy. Seriously, that Cow... Tits..."

Suddenly, the image of her impressive bust surfaced in Fear's mind. Taking a further look, those contemptible protrusions seemed to be right before her eyes. Before she knew it, she found her hands unceremoniously grabbing them and squeezing away.

"Yah! W-Why are you grabbing my breasts again!?"

"Umm sorry. As soon as I am reminded of her, my hands start moving on their own. By the way... I've been wondering for a while, hmm~ What on earth are these things filled with...? Anyway, sorry, could you accompany me again to scout out the the enemy?"

"I-I have no idea what you're talking about—!"

Hiding in a dark corner behind the vending machine, Haruaki stared intently at the two girls on the bench.

"—What the heck are those two doing...?"

Due to Fear's visible depression, he had planned to chase after her to listen to her grievances... But seeing them massaging each other's breasts, it would have

been too embarrassing to call out to them. So after that, he followed them around like a stalker.

Even though they had done some strange things, in the end, Fear seemed to have recovered her spirits. Perhaps this was a good thing—Haruaki thought to himself. Since she had come to school, it would have been troubling if she were unable to interact with other students normally. Shiraho was basically someone intermediate between a normal person and those involved in the world of cursed tools, as a practice partner she was perfect—disregarding the issue of whether breast massages counted as normal interaction or not.

That said—Haruaki pondered their next step.

Through Zenon's arrangements, security was tightened but Sovereignty had still been able to invade the school and absorb life force from a student. Haruaki did not want to blame security—after all, suddenly reserving security personnel was not that easy and numbers could not be changed within a day or two.

"In that case, it's still up to us to handle the issue..."

Feeling like the bell for class was about to ring, he made his way back to the classroom. He had thought about going to search for Sovereignty, but like yesterday, it was very probable she had escaped already. Of course, it was also possible she was still around, so he had no choice but to continue searching and staying on alert when out of class—but if he were to skip classes without a good reason and become suspected of being involved in the incident, he would be unable to take action when a real crisis emerges.

Still, there were things he should do during class. Namely, contemplating plans for the future.

It was vexing to have failed in preventing victims today. He felt anger and anxiety towards his own powerlessness. He could not allow another incident to happen—Indeed, it was absolutely unacceptable. No matter what, he had to put in maximum effort.

But alone, he was just an ordinary human with insignificant power. Simply stated, the conclusion was—

The power of everyone on the team needed to be gathered. They had to

discuss seriously as a team to decide how they should act. If they all acted separately, even something within their grasp would not be caught.

"The situation no longer calls for an assistant. But the problem is how the boss feels—Well, how could I get this past her... Before the lunch break, I must come up with a way to broach the subject."

Part 10

The lunch break arrived.

"Fear-chan, and Akki too, time for lunch! But given the choice, I'd prefer to eat Fear-chan herself! Like this, lying on a plate, with sashimi raw fish laid on top... Teehee!"

"Fear-chan, I am truly grateful for the earlier treat! But it's a slight shame, if only Konoha-san was the partner! If that was the case, I could... Half a year! It would last me half a year!"

"To be honest, I've always been thinking, the very fact that you two were able to get into this school is absolutely ridiculous. Let's ignore these idiots, Yachi, I'm not going to lose to you today."

"Hey Fear, after we finish eating, I have something to discuss—"

Amidst the chaos of four people talking at the same time—

"I'm sorry! I'm not eating lunch today, I don't mind if any of you finish off my portion!"

The silver-haired girl rushed out into the corridor with great vigor. Taizou and Kana stared blankly at the receding image of her back as Haruaki slumped his shoulders in disappointment.

"I gave it so much thought... I even had five different proposals..."

One of those who stayed—Kirika looked at Haruaki as if she wanted to say something. However—

"Let's hurry and eat then go find her... Hmm? Class Rep, what's the matter?"

"N-No, it's nothing."

For some reason she was shrinking back mildly with her face turned away. As if trying to occupy herself, she started moving desks together to form a small

island.

Then their meal started without Fear. First they had the usual cooking battle—ending in Kirika's teeth-gnashing defeat once again. In a certain sense, lunch played out exactly the same as in the past.

"By the way, I wonder if Tsucchi will be okay~?"

"Tsucchi? Oh, you mean Tsuchiya? Recently, there's been a lot of cases of malnutrition and anemia."

As soon as they began eating, Kana and Taizou brought up the subject.

Haruaki's chopsticks wavered slightly but he pretended nothing had happened and continued with his meal.

"Who knows what's going on~? I think it must be something supernatural."

Kana always looked like a dunce, but she turned out to be surprisingly sharp.

"I support the chloroform psycho theory instead. Secretly approaching students from behind, quietly smoldering them with chloroform, then satisfied with rendering them unconscious, he leaves without doing anything else... What a super gentlemanly pervert, wouldn't you guys agree?"

Taizou always looked like a dunce, but he really was a dunce to the core.

"But weren't there a number of male students amongst the victims too?"

"...Exactly because he's a gentleman, he also has interests of that sort. It's not very commendable."

"Besides, I've heard that inhalation of chloroform doesn't put people to sleep that quickly. It really is a supernatural phenomenon, maybe the ghost of a deceased male student? Rumors say that the person who discovered the fainted student today seemed to have witnessed a striking handsome youth!"

"That sounds so fake~ The Chloroform Baron should be a more of a dandy, definitely! Walking stick in hand, wearing a top hat, with a V-shaped beard of course! In other words, a veritable universal pervert!"

The two eagerly discussed the nonexistent male ghost and gentleman pervert. If that doll did end up being sighted, it would be quite troublesome—just as

Haruaki watched their debate with lukewarm enthusiasm—

"Yachi, what's your opinion?"

Despite her usual "I have nothing to do with idiotic conversations" philosophy, Kirika posed a question. She was nonchalantly picking away at her lunchbox—but her gaze showed a surprising air of seriousness.

Oh no, she must have realized something? But since Haruaki was obliged to feign complete ignorance of cursed tools when interacting with Kirika, that meant he had to pretend he was not involved with anything of that sort...

"I-I have no idea! It's definitely a coincidence! But if it really turns out to be a pervert then it's troubling. Don't go off to remote areas alone!"

"Hmm?"

Kirika narrowed her eyes with dissatisfaction. Why did she react this way? In any case, it was quite scary.

"Okay, let me try the taste of this hamburg steak! Actually, the proportion of minced meat is a bit difficult to get right, today I was only able to—"

"...Hmph!"

Kirika poked her chopsticks into Haruaki's lunchbox and delivered a piece of the hamburg steak into her mouth.

"Hey—! What are you doing, Class Rep!"

"Seriously... No, this can't be helped... That said... This vexes me... Hmph, why don't you try my hamburg steak! Yeah, sorry about it being the loser's taste!"

She grumbled disapprovingly. In actual fact, Kirika's hamburg steak had already surpassed average passing standards, so she should not be getting angry over this. Haruaki was truly puzzled over her displeasure.

"Oh? How unfair! I want to eat Haruaki's hamburg steak too! That taste testing just now was nowhere satisfying enough!"

"The meat squeezed and shaped by Akki's hand with indecent motions, I want to eat it~"

"What's with you two...!"

Just as Haruaki had his hands full with the slapstick, a male student suddenly approached.

"Yachi, someone just asked me to bring you a message."

"A message... From who? Fear?"

"No, it's a boy I've never seen before. A really handsome dude who'd probably fit right in with Johnny's."^[4]

"Eh? Why does that kind of description sound so much like me? That's my splitting image. When did I send someone to deliver a message... Hoho, how embarrassing~"

Haruaki ignored Taizou's incomprehensible ramblings behind him.

"I don't know anyone who looks like that either... What did he say?"

"He wanted you to go immediately to the drinking fountain next to the sports ground."

"Immediately? Why?"

"No idea, he just said it was urgent. Well then, I've delivered the message."

Since it was about something urgent, Haruaki could not ignore the message. Covering up the lunchbox he was about to eat, he stood up—only to find Taizou and Kana's gazing at him with a serious expression.

"Isn't this a bad situation? Taicchi~"

"Yeah, really bad... To be singled out by a handsome dude, unmistakably, this must be—"

" "A love confession!" "

The two clenched their fists with excitement.

"Take care! Remember to report back with the juicy details! If possible, take a photo too!"

"Watch your ass carefully!"

"...Hey."

Haruaki glared at the two. However—

"A-Absolutely ridiculous! T-That kind of thing—I forbid it absolutely! Even imagining it is forbidden!"

For some reason, Kirika seemed even more outraged than Haruaki as she scolded the two, her face flushed red.

Changing into outdoor shoes, Haruaki came to a corner of the sports ground. A concrete drinking fountain mainly used by the sports clubs. Since it was a fair distance from the school building, hardly anyone ever came here except during club activities.

"There's no one... To think he called me out here deliberately."

Let's wait a while longer—His back leaning against the wire fencing, Haruaki surveyed his surroundings. There were no security guards visible on the sports ground. Probably because the chances of someone intruding or escaping from such a visually unobstructed location was quite low, the guards were stationed somewhere else... Either that or they were monitoring from a secluded position.

In the center of the sports ground, a group of lively boys were currently playing soccer. The noise sounded quite distant, like listening to outside bustling from a library window. For some reason, Haruaki felt a sense of loneliness as he watched.

Blankly staring out at the distant scene, just as he was thinking to himself "That goalie sure doesn't get much action~"—

Despite there being no one around him, he heard a voice.

"Greetings, human. Are you still searching for me?"

"—!"

Instantly clearing his thoughts, Haruaki suddenly backed off from the fence and turned around.

Standing on the other side of the fence was, obviously—

"Sovereignty...!"

"If you were to mistake me for anyone else, you deserve to have your eyes gouged out and replaced with glass beads, human."

Just as usual, her voice sounded like a natural phenomenon while her face was as exquisite as an artificial work of art. With stiff movements evocative of noisily creaking joints, she lifted an arm and entwined her slender porcelain fingers around the fencing.

The fence was roughly three meters tall with barbed wire on top. Impossible to climb. The only way to reach her was through words.

"Why are you—I get it now... You were the one who sent me the message? Grabbing an unrelated student, then asking him to 'Help me deliver a message to someone in Yachi's class,' is that it?"

A telephone game. All it took was passing the message through two people and the original speaker would be unknown.

"For a foolish human, you understand rather quickly."

"Calling me out here, what are your intentions?"

"Don't be so confrontational. I arranged this because it would be impossible to converse calmly if those other two kin are present. I won't harm you, human."

"Converse eh... Very well, I happen to have things to tell you too. Even though I had hoped you would appear earlier before lunch time."

"Regarding this matter, human. Listen carefully with those ears of yours, no better than hollow logs."

"This matter?"

"Indeed, I do absorb the life force of humans, but that does not endanger their lives—They will recover in a matter of days. So please, could you treat this as a flu epidemic and turn a blind eye?"

Haruaki frowned. By this point, why would she say something like that?

As if reading the doubt in his mind—

"Because that silver kin doesn't seem like she will give up and also the guards

roaming about today. Though they present no significant threat, it is still quite troublesome—which is why I have come to confirm with you, would you give up and leave me alone?"

Sovereignty spoke with calm composure.

As usual, it was impossible to discern her intentions. Only one fact was clear, that she still intended to continue sucking life force within the school.

But that was immaterial. Whether or not she should be left alone was not the fundamental issue.

"My answer is... You have misunderstood. Simply that."

"Misunderstood?"

Those inorganic eyes of hers displayed signs of doubt. Haruaki looked her straight in the face. Indeed—weren't they searching for her in order to inform her of this?

"Your curse can be lifted. In fact, my family has always been helping out in this area. Both the silver-haired little lady and the glasses girl are living at my house, gradually lifting their curses."

"..."

"You have misunderstood. Shiraho's father did not send you to the superintendent to have you destroyed. Naturally, we do not intend to destroy you either. Shiraho wants to see you again and has been looking for you. She wants to apologize for having failed to stop her father. So—there is no need for you to escape. Running around and affecting others with your curse like this helps no one."

Indeed, this was for the sake of Sovereignty herself.

"Would you like to come to my home to lift your curse? I don't think you enjoy draining people of their life force, right? Your curse might be a bit more troublesome, so perhaps it cannot be treated the same way as the others—but I promise you, we will surely do everything we can to lift your curse in the most painless manner possible. Trust me!"

The few seconds spent waiting for her response felt like eons.

Her slender fingers, white as porcelain, separated from the fencing. Those long lashes of hers fluttered as she blinked. The wind blew and scattered her beautiful hair. Then she straightened her back and spoke:

"Human, I have only one thing to say."

More like a doll than ever,

More emotionless than ever,

More beautiful than ever—

She smiled.

"Curses—Do you truly believe that everyone wishes for their curse to be lifted?"

"Eh—"

What did she just say? Haruaki could not comprehend.

During this time, Sovereignty closed her eyes at one point then opened them again and resumed her usual cheerless demeanor.

"If you still don't understand, let me be blunt. I have no intention of going to your place, human."

"W-Why!? Your curse can be lifted! I know that your kind are cursed involuntarily, so you have no wish to harm people with your curse! Tell me why...!"

"I have already spoken. That does not apply to me. Humans are truly foolish."

"Do you really not care about humans? If you really believe you'll be destroyed, I guess you can't help distrusting humans. But please—Shiraho wants to apologize to you. She doesn't want you to harm humans anymore! Of course I feel the same way! Maybe I have no right to say this, but even if you continue doing this, what would you achieve?"

"Who knows? What might happen eh~"

"..."

Haruaki clenched his fist so tightly his nails dug into his palm. Why!? Why

would this doll not want her curse to be lifted even when she now knew a way to do so...?

(Are you that disappointed with humans? That's just so...)

At this moment.

Behind him on the sports ground, the group of people originally playing soccer were even noisier than before. Apparently some new teammates had joined up with them. Without listening on purpose, Haruaki overheard their conversation—

"Really? Another one!"

"I just took a look, there's a whole crowd gathered!"

"Great, that means I won the bet! Now taking bets on 'more people will faint starting noon onwards,' who else?"

"Me me me! Hehe, thanks!"

Haruaki looked back at Sovereignty in shock.

"Could it be... That you attacked another student before you came here?"

A few seconds later, the reply was—

"—Well, why don't you see for yourself? Human."

In the end, she simply responded with her usual attitude. Then moving away from the fence, still dragging one limping leg, she turned around and started to leave.

"W-Wait!"

Haruaki frantically grabbed the fence. If only these hands were as sharp as swords—gnashing his teeth he made his final protests—

"Why only in this school!? What is your purpose!?"

Looking over her shoulder, she cast him a glance—

Without saying a word, she disappeared before Haruaki's eyes.

He was unable to climb over the fence. Even if he took the long route through

the school gates, she would be long gone by then—Furthermore, even if he caught up to her, he had no ability to subdue her superhuman powers by himself.

In any case, he decided to contact Konoha by cellphone first. Although there was a ringing tone, no one picked up. Did she leave it in her desk...? Fear also had no cellphone so there was no easy way to meet up with them. Well then, what should be done—pondering, Haruaki then thought of the fainted student. If all the other bystanders failed to show compassion and the student was still collapsed at the same spot, Haruaki would take it upon himself to carry him or her to the infirmary.

Inquiring the soccer group, he found out the location was apparently the hallway on the first floor in the school building, near the service entrance. And the description of the student was—

"...!"

The instant he heard, Haruaki immediately sprinted as fast as he could. He had no choice but to run.

Traversing the sports ground he rushed towards the school building.

Panting and out of breath, he entered the hallway through the service entrance and looked around. Beyond the crowd he could spot a figure lying on the floor.

The instant he saw who it was, he felt his heart beat intensely.

Thump thump.

His heart which had already been racing from his sprinting—

Haruaki felt as if his heart was jumping out of his chest.

The people at the sports ground had said,

"It was a girl wearing glasses, with two pigtails and an especially impressive bust."

Chapter 3 - Times When Even the Fictional is Desired / "Who is her? - Who is she?"

Part 1

The rarely used Japanese-style room, only brought back into use the day before yesterday, still carried the lingering odor of stale long sealed off tatami. Given a few more days, the room should be instilled with vitality that comes with being inhabited as well as trace amounts of air freshener one could only detect with a deep breath.

In this living space, the size of six tatami mats, the only furniture present was the dresser Haruaki moved from the detached accessory dwelling just yesterday. Other objects included various schoolbag articles, magazines, paperbacks and a spare uniform on a hanger—Indeed, this room was undergoing a transformation from "an empty room" into "someone's bedroom."

And the master of the bedroom was Muramasa Konoha, currently collapsed in bed.

"...Hah... Mmm... Haa..."

Her skin faintly reddened, her breathing irregular, she frowned from time to time. Even though she looked like that, it was not as if she was tormented on the verge of death, but more like suffering from a fever from a flu. It happened only rarely, but having acquired human traits, she did occasionally catch flus and colds. According to Fear's judgment: "...I don't really think illness affects our core. Anyway, just let her sleep it off."

Haruaki took out a towel from a washbowl and wrung it dry to replace the one on Konoha's forehead.

"Mmm..."

Seeing her brow relax slightly, Haruaki breathed a sigh of relief and took a look at her expression.

Her slightly open red lips released warm breath against his ear. For the very first time, Haruaki noticed how long and slender her lashes were beneath those glasses. Pressed against her neck, somehow her hair seemed especially gorgeous compared to normal. Tiny beads of sweat were currently flowing down her collarbone towards her chest—

"Ack, why am I staring...?! No way no way, this is too rude!"

He went and opened the sliding door to provide some air circulation. One advantage of Japanese style residences was the good ventilation. Yes! —Just as he swelled his chest proudly towards the breeze—

"...Haruaki... -kun...?"

"Oh, are you awake now? Are you okay? You should continue sleeping!"

He returned to her pillow side. Konoha looked up hazily at Haruaki.

"What happened to me... Ah yes, at school... Something was sucked out from me—then, then..."

"You can tell me once you recover your energy. You should rest properly now."

"Outside, the sky is still bright. Does that mean, I left school early...?"

"Yeah. The teachers know about our family situation, so they simply gave permission for me and Fear to leave as well. After all, we can't take you to a hospital—Sorry."

"I was just about to say sorry... For giving you trouble. Eh... Pajamas...?"

As if she finally realized her state of dress, Konoha suddenly stared at Haruaki awkwardly, her cheeks blushing instantly. She must have jumped to a mistaken conclusion.

"No! I asked Fear to help you change!"

"Ah, I see... However, I don't actually mind if it's you, Haruaki-kun... Even if I'm seen by you..."

Was it because of the fever? Nonchalantly, she made a rather problematic statement. In any case, Haruaki decided to pretend he did not hear it.

"Anyway, are you really okay? I've heard that other victims simply became lethargic, but none of them showed flu-like symptoms like you."

"Hmm... Presumably because we were born from 'human thoughts'... Any unusual conditions in mind or vigor will affect our bodies directly? But there's nothing to worry about, for I'm sure I will recover faster as well, conversely."

"I see. Then in any case, you should rest... I will bring porridge for you later tonight. Would you like egg or milk in your porridge? Any other requests?"

"Meat porridge."

"No such item on the menu. Isn't that bad for digestion? Denied! Denied!"

Haruaki feigned anger while Konoha shyly laughed "ehehe."

"Other than food, do you have anything else you want? If you want to sleep in peace, I can leave immediately."

"Anything I want...?"

Konoha gave Haruaki a slanting glance then immediately averted her gaze.

"Well~ I have this feeling... It's just a feeling, okay!? Perhaps I might recover if a certain act was performed... Not simply because I'm in the mood, but I really have this feeling..."

"Oh? Then go ahead and tell me."

She threw him another glance. This time she shyly pulled up the quilt to cover her face.

"Hey...? Konoha...?"

Childishly, she exposed one eye from beneath the quilt.

"...Hand."

"Hand?"

"Haruaki-kun's... hand. I want to... hold hands tightly... May I?"

This was even more childish. Haruaki felt even more embarrassed instead—
However...

"Yeah... Something so simple... Sure."

Haruaki reached out with his right hand and Konoha held it tightly with both hands extending from the futon. Soft, warm hands. Although they had held hands before in many situations, perhaps due to her pajamas look and mildly watery gaze acting as catalysts to cause a chemical reaction, Haruaki felt his heart rate rise rapidly to incredible levels.

Even so, Konoha continued to awkwardly—

"Hmm—How should I say it? Not exactly like this... But further... Yeah!"

"Wha!?"

Suddenly pulled by Konoha, Haruaki fell over towards the futon. Entering his view was Konoha lying down with a shy smile. The hand that had been pulled, was now held in Konoha's hands—stuffed into her bosom.

"Woah...!?"

"I-I'm sorry, but this... This way... Makes me feel reassured... Sort of like finding something I had lost...? Don't worry, so... Just for now... Hoo..."

"S-She even fell asleep..."

This was quite a predicament. Of course, Konoha sleeping peacefully was a good thing, but Haruaki himself was in a predicament.

Haruaki's senses were being overwhelmed by the soft and warm sensation completely enveloping his hand. With just the slightest motion, that unfamiliar tactile sensation quivered and bounced. The gentle reassuring feeling evoked was comfortable beyond belief, causing Haruaki to wonder if he was melting and assimilated into one being. Strange sweat was dripping profusely.

(W-What should I do...?)

—Several dozen minutes passed.

Who knew if it was because he was straining his arm in a weird posture, his hand was beginning to cramp. Haruaki was at his limit. Konoha's breathing had become regular, so Haruaki attempted to escape.

"Fu... Mmm."

His hand gradually sucked into the bosom amidst sweat and body warmth, Haruaki moved cautiously like a bomb squad in action. A couple minutes later, he finally managed to extract his hand from her chest—

"Mmmmmm hmm..."

Konoha happened to turn in her sleep. Coincidentally, Haruaki's fingertip was caught on the pajamas, causing a button to pop loose. As the curve traced by her complexion entered his view, Haruaki could not help but gulp hard. But by this point he had no choice but to continue with his escape.

His hand was still being held by Konoha. Carefully disengaging her fingers, he managed to release one hand. Then at this moment—

"Why do I feel... so... hot..."

Konoha squirmed and kicked the quilt down beneath her feet. Somehow another button popped loose from her chest. The valley of exposed skin deepened. Due to departure of the quilt, Konoha's lower torso also came into view.

"...Pfft!"

Haruaki frantically covered his mouth as an emergency effort to stop the remark he almost let loose.

Perhaps due to friction with the futon, Konoha's pajama bottom had slid down slightly from her hips. Just by a few centimeters. But mere centimeters were enough to expose the edge of her pelvis as well as a body part that could either be her hip, thigh or butt, an ambiguous domain of skin that would scream for an arbitration committee to delineate clear boundaries. Besides, considering the vast triangular region of contention, this was undoubtedly—

(WHY!)

Haruaki screamed inside. The criminal was definitely the one who dressed

Konoha. It was most likely the first time for that girl to help someone change? Was it because Haruaki had simply said "Help take off her clothes and put on pajamas" for his request? Instead of emphasizing "Help her put on pajamas AND underwear," is that the reason!? How could this be possible!? Even though she looked a little off, making this kind of mistake was really too clueless...!

"Mmm mmm.. Hmm... Ah mmm... Ah..."

Konoha tossed and turned greatly in her sleep. Yet another button popped loose on her chest. This was on the verge of a critical point. Just a little more movement... No, just one more deep breath and surely the half-exposed bulges lying beneath the precariously buttoned pajama top would be exposed in plain sight...!

The last button was about to pop. It was going to pop with a "Boing!"

"Ah... Ah..."

For some reason, Haruaki found himself unable to tear his gaze away. His entire body was frozen.

The pajama top's tension gradually lost equilibrium—



Just as expected, it popped open with a "Boing!"—

Konoha returned to the form of a Japanese sword.

Part 2

Fear watched with lifeless eyes the spacious and completely normal garden. Hugging her knees she sat on the porch, completely motionless like a piece of furniture. However, her mind never stopped thinking.

—Once again, she had failed to do anything.

—Conversely, what could she have done instead?

—She heard it.

There is nothing you cannot do.

Her ears echoed with the voice of the castle lord. Come on, let's go, let's go, let's go, let's go!

Injure. Damage. Violate. Disgrace. Prick. Crush. Pierce. Open. Smash. Rend. Burn. Pull. Skin. Shave. Pluck. Cut. Beat. Perforate. Shoot. Bite. Strike. Bind. Hack. Slash. Grill. Wring. Hollow. Break. Stretch. Press—Wow! You are the source of all fear and disaster!

Hence in this domain, there is nothing you cannot do!

Namely, torture! Torture! Torture!

Namely, execution! Execution! Execution!

Kukuku, hahaha, gahahahahahahahahahahahaha
kyahahahahahahahahahaha—!!

Fear smashed her fist into the porch. With a resounding "Crash!", the disturbing laughter vanished.

But still it lingered in her mind. This was only natural, for it did indeed happen in the past.

The nightmare taunted her. Look! Did you see that? —Despising her.

As much as she tried to help, nothing was achieved—That was her current self.

Yes, perhaps succeeding at nothing was inevitable. The castle lord's laughter made her realize what she had already known deep down.

"I knew it... I was doomed from the very start...?"

—Because, no matter who.

—Indeed, given her long history of existence, everyone was the same.

—No one was going to cry to an all-purpose torture tool for help and salvation.

Part 3

"Hmm... I don't know if I should exclaim how fortunate, or how regrettable... No wait! Of course it was fortunate! It's not like I was harboring some sort of indecent desire, so there's nothing regrettable about it...!"

Walking along the porch, Haruaki seemed to be muttering as if justifying himself to someone. He left Konoha to continue sleeping as a sword since he had once heard that when cursed tools were unwell, it was less stressful to return to their original forms. That said, helping a Japanese sword to pull up the covers was quite a new experience.

In any case, Konoha's issue was temporarily handled. The problem was the other person—

Fear was sitting on the edge of the porch, still in school uniform, hugging her shins, chin against her knees, blankly staring at the garden. Had Haruaki left her in school, who knew what sort of ruckus she might cause, which was why he had her retire early as well.

Haruaki sat down beside her. Without shifting her gaze, Fear asked:

"...How is she...?"

"Much better apparently, she'll probably make a full recovery given more sleep."

"I see."

Having left Fear alone for roughly an hour, Haruaki expected her to ridicule him and say: "You must have been doing something shameless together with Cow Tits!"—but she seemed quite distracted. From Haruaki's perspective, although being interrogated what happened would be a pain, seeing Fear so uncharacteristically gloomy was even more troubling.

"What's the matter, Fear? Do you have a stomach ache? It must be the

counterattack of all those rice crackers you devoured mercilessly!"

He deliberately spoke cheerfully and poked Fear's knees through the kneesocks covering them. This resulted in Fear falling over on her side with a crash. However, she still maintained her curled in a ball posture, completely immobile. Clearly her problem was no minor matter.

Now what? —Just as Haruaki worried, he heard a faint murmur from her curled up figure.

"I... am so useless..."

"..."

"I gave my promise. Someone even said she looked forward to it. I wanted to do my best—but failed. I could neither catch the doll nor protect my classmates... And even Cow Tits was..."

No matter how poorly they got along, Fear and Konoha approved of each other on a certain level. Nevertheless, out of a matter of pride, Fear refused to display such sentiments outwardly. Always trying to ridicule her—but now that Konoha had fainted, Fear insisted on being responsible.

(...She really looks like she's disheartened.)

Perhaps due to excessive confidence—Haruaki thought. Due to the incident happening immediately after Shiraho cheered her up, her determination to try harder was probably transformed into a sense of helplessness instead. Haruaki recalled Fear's personality—usually so arrogant but always falling into a bottomless valley of depression on her own—at the same time, he was reminded of what it felt like to jump into the sea.

"What have I achieved till now? Is it really hopeless... Am I really hopeless at helping others? I guess that's right, after all, I'm just a tool for harming others. All I can do is gouge, crush and shave off human flesh—a tool for torture and execution, guh...!"

"Oh yeah! What about a simulation of a rice cake's stretching form, how amazing!"

Haruaki examined Fear's expression and began to pull on her cheeks. As her

cheeks stretched, Fear's face was also lifted up.

"You, what are you doing!? I'll curse you, dummy—!"

"I forbid you to use the term 'after all.'"

"...What?"

"You only need to continue acting as yourself. A term like 'after all' only serves as an excuse for giving up. Besides, didn't you help an old lady yesterday? Cabbage master!"

Haruaki loosened his grip and withdrew his hands. Rubbing her cheeks, Fear replied:

"But that's totally different, in terms of level..."

"Maybe. There are times when even more troubling challenges surface. You find yourself powerless and tempted to say 'after all.' During times like these—Just rely on others! What's wrong with that?"

Fear stared back into Haruaki's eyes with surprise but immediately diverted her gaze, muttering "But... I want to do it on my own..." She did not understand. This girl still did not understand.

"Like I said~ You should learn how to rely on others more. Of course accomplishing things single-handedly would be ideal, but isn't it meaningless if you end up helping no one because you refuse to compromise your pride? People won't mock you just because you ask for help. Neither will anyone look down on you, say you're worthless, or dismiss you with an 'after all' comment."

However—Fear's insistence was only natural in a certain sense.

After all, tools were created with purpose. They were created to fulfill a purpose. Conversely, a tool that relied on outside assistance to fulfill its intended purpose would be no different from a "failure."

Perhaps Fear instinctively felt terrified of such a pronouncement.

Seriously—it should already be obvious she was no ordinary tool.

"Hmm... But..."

"Ah—Really! By the way, I'll let you in on a secret. When you seek others for

help, this in itself could also be a good deed because it sometimes makes other people happy."

"How so?"

"—If the person feels happy for being relied on, isn't that a good deed? So—"

Haruaki scratched his head.

"I already said I wanted to help you. I want to be relied on by you. If you show such a gloomy expression, it makes me feel troubled."

"I see... It's... Okay for me to rely on you...?"

"Yes! This is the assistant's revolt, having reached the limit of his tolerance! From now on, I will stand on equal ground with you as a shareholding partner! Prepare yourself!"

Fear's eyes instantly relaxed but then she immediately pouted.

"How arrogant. But... If you really refuse to compromise no matter what, I will promote you from assistant to shareholding partner! So—You will work for me with full effort! Don't slack off!"

Smack! She slapped Haruaki on the back, perhaps to hide her embarrassment.

Sitting properly on the porch, Fear finally straightened her hunchback posture. Arms akimbo, she knelt with her upper torso raised up high, going "hmph!" complacently.

"So, what's next?"

"What's next...? What do you suggest?"

"In any case, I have to do something first."

Just as Haruaki expected her to continue speaking, Fear pulled his cheeks.

"Owwwwww... What are you doing!?"

"Hmph, just a return favor. Also, let me remind you, my hearing is superb."

"So what—"

"Just now, from Cow Tits' room I heard what sounded like moans—What did the shameless brat do with her...?"

"Eh!? Finally it comes!"

"Those sounds, I heard them! The strange sounds she made! Your irregular breathing! Even though I have no idea what you actually did, in any case... Completely shameless!"

"Wait! I understand how you feel but it's just a misunderstanding! Ah! Woohoo! Did you hear that just now? The doorbell, someone arrived! I must welcome the guest, so let me take my leave!"

"What are you going 'woohoo' for!? Hey, stop, you're not allowed to escape...!"

Haruaki escaped.

As he arrived at the entrance, the bell rang again. Yeah yeah I'm here—Haruaki opened the door to find...

"Oh it's you, Class Rep."

Kirika stood outside. Probably on her way back from school? She was still in uniform with her school bag.

"Sorry for the sudden intrusion."

"No problem at all. What's up?"

"I heard Konoha collapsed. So, how should I say this, I came to visit—Also there's the fact that you all left school early. In other words, I'm a bit concerned."

Hesitantly, Kirika alternated her glances between Haruaki and her feet. It was quite rare to see her in such a state of indecision.

"Oh okay, she's fine now. It's just like a flu so she should recover soon. She should still be sleeping, so would you like to have a glimpse of her in bed...? Oh, please wait for me a bit."

Since Konoha had returned to sword form, there was no one to see her face. Restoring her to human form was probably a tall order... No, but since Kirika was privy to the truth, it should be okay? Then again, he already promised her

to feign ignorance... What should he do? Just as Haruaki agonized over the complicated situation—

"No, it's fine if she's asleep. So long as I know she's okay, I don't have to worry. By the way, there's also the matter of you two—"

"Us two? We're actually fine. Just that we left early to take care of the patient."

"I know. I know, but... Damn it, I'm asking if there's any way I can help out!"

She defiantly added emphasis to her tone.

"Eh? But Konoha's only sleeping so there's no need to take special care of her. I don't think there's anything in particular to trouble you, Class Rep... Umm... To help..."

Why was she angry? Haruaki shrank back.

Kirika became even more displeased and rested her forehead against her hand as if suffering a headache:

"Tsk, why you little... I never expected things to come to this... Yes, your principles are admirable... That's right, but you are really good-natured to a fault—Damn it, Yachi, you're such a frustrating guy!"

"I-I'm listening, Class Rep. Did I say something wrong?"

"Hoo... The problem lies in the fact that 'you said nothing wrong'—Enough, I understand now. In order to get this through your thick skull, I have made my decision."

While she was speaking, Kirika raised her right arm. With a slithering sound from her sleeve, a leather belt extended out. Haruaki knew this was her self-defense equipment. An object she called a Wathe.

In other words, a cursed tool—the «Tragic Black River».

"Wah!"

The belt wrapped around Haruaki's neck and pulled him. Although the force was not enough to strangle him, he could not resist. Just as he was about to fall over forwards, Kirika used her other hand to grab the belt on his neck, thereby

maintaining Haruaki's forward leaning posture. This was like having someone pulling on a necktie.

Kirika's prim and proper face drew near and Haruaki could even feel her breath. He felt rather unsettled.

"Uh... Class Rep, what is... Going on?"

"You still don't get it?"

"I'm very sorry, but no."

"Seriously... I am deliberately displaying the object 'I hope you pretend you never saw,' at least you should know what that means? Currently, I am neither 'someone belonging to the Lab Chief's Nation' nor 'the class representative who wants you to feign ignorance of her identity,' got that?"

"In that case... who are you?"

"—Isn't it obvious? I am purely myself, Ueno Kirika. The Ueno Kirika who doesn't mind her own business and helped you previously. What absolutely ridiculous word games I'm playing here."

"So... Does that mean..."

Kirika helplessly curled the corner of her lips as if exhausted. She withdrew the belt back into her sleeve.

"Yeah... So you guys are facing some sort of trouble, right? You really suck at concealing the matter. Since I already know something is going on, getting ignored makes me quite mad, okay? Don't forget, feigning ignorance also builds up stress!"

"In other words, you still want to help? But... Are you allowed?"

"Same as last time. As the class representative, I cannot ignore the troubles faced by my fellow classmates. Besides—"

Kirika pouted slightly as she glared at Haruaki.

"If trying to feign ignorance of my secret alters your attitude towards me, we might as well go back to interacting with shared secrets. I've changed my mind. To be honest, the way you were treating me today and yesterday, it's like

there's a wall between us. So frustrating."

"Hmm, I'm actually aware of that... I'm sorry. The more I tried to pretend, the more it seems to weigh on my mind."

"Never mind, I understand you're useless in that way. So, as long as we go back to the way it was before—there's no problem, right?"

In contrast to her unforgiving words, Kirika's face seemed to be relaxing as if she had been looking forward to reassuring resolution.

Part 4

"I see, now I basically get the situation."

Kirika drank from the tea cup like a solemn samurai warrior. This was her second visit to this living room. In the past, Haruaki would have found such a scene unthinkable, but incredibly, he was already accustomed to it.

(Hmm... Speaking of accustomed, this girl is getting even more used to Kirika.)

Fear was munching away on rice crackers as she faced Kirika. Perhaps due to the prior conversation with Haruaki, Fear accepted Kirika's help readily.

"I still have numerous questions about the details, but let's organize our facts starting from the main issues—You guys might be quite clear on things, but I only heard your explanation just now."

"Thank you. It's possible that you might notice things that we missed, Class Rep."

"Chew chew chew... That's right. Without preconceived notions, sometimes a second opinion might be helpful."

"First of all, that Sovereignty Perfection Doll, why did she refuse Yachi's invitation and escape? Secondly, why does she only drain life force within the school? Third question, where is she currently hiding? —Those are the issues."

"Right. And then?"

Kirika sipped a mouthful of tea then stated solemnly:

"I don't know."

"..."

"W-What's with that look? I'm just trying to organize the facts of the mystery! Besides, it's not like answers can be obtained so simply!"

As if disappointed with Haruaki and Fear's attitude, Kirika stared back in

return, her face subtly blushing.

"I just want to say, perhaps..."

"Well, you have as much information as we do now. Looks like this mystery isn't that easy to solve..."

Haruaki and Fear's attempts to comfort backfired. Kirika frowned with displeasure:

"Now that you two put it that way, it feels like I failed your expectations. That's so maddening. And Fear, our information is still not the same. At this point, why don't you recount what happened in greater detail?"

"Recount what happened in greater detail?"

"The parts you skimmed over just now. When, where, who, what was done, how things occurred, what happened, *etc.* I want to listen again about the incident from the very beginning. Sometimes small questions can lead to clues to bigger questions—In order to answer the small questions, this is a necessary step."

With the sound of her teacup placed on the table, Kirika closed her eyes and crossed her arms with a stern expression.

"Really... Yes, I am taking things seriously. I will put forth my mind and soul to think of a solution. So even though it's quite troublesome, you two must tell me everything. Having all information is essential. While I was listening to the basic story just now, there were a few places which bothered me."

Then she opened one eye and requested softly: "Yachi, another cup please."

Haruaki smiled wryly and stood up with the cup, whispering in Fear's ear along the way:

"...See, here's a very reliable comrade, and one who never admits defeat."

"Speaking of never admitting defeat, I'm the same. But—it makes me happy to know that someone is getting serious for my sake."

Fear relaxed her expression and reached out for the plate of snacks for tea. Then she did something surprising.

"Please have some, Kirika. Rice crackers are really tasty!"

Part 5

—Muramasa Konoha had a dream.

Caught in the narrow gap between consciousness and unconsciousness, a hazy state required to recover from abnormality.

Abnormality meant loss, being deprived of a certain something very similar to a soul or life force.

Her hazy consciousness did not understand the meaning implied. But there was no need to understand either.

Because she had already retrieved it.

Chest and hand. Warmth. Him. Troubled expression. Pulsation. A gentle hand.

(Mmm...)

From deep within her body, something akin to a lamp lit up. Feeling its warmth, there was no need to worry anymore.

Consequently, with only the comforting feeling of a certain person's embrace

—

Muramasa Konoha had a dream.

Morning lessons ended with the arrival of the lunch break.

Today's lunchbox was prepared together with Haruaki. Haruaki was responsible for the main dish, the hamburg steak, while Konoha handled the side dishes herself. It had been a while since the last time they cooked together. She was confident she did a good job and he did offer praise after taste testing.

They had brought lunchboxes to school with identical contents. She suddenly realized, what did this normally imply between people? As she took out her lunchbox, Konoha relaxed her expression. Technically, three people were

involved in its preparation, but she was going to ignore that fact.

"Fufu... Ehehe."

"Konoha-chan, what are your plans for lunch today?"

"A! Uh hmm... Well, today..."

She wanted to have lunch together with him, given this rare occasion with identical lunchboxes. Furthermore, she wanted to check out Fear's condition, planning to suggest after the meal that it was time for everyone to pitch in their full effort to resolve the incident together.

Informing her friend, Konoha left the classroom. She had intended to buy a drink on her way, so she first walked towards the vending machine at the shoe locker area. Just as she descended to the ground floor—

"Eh?"

Through the glass window, she spotted Haruaki's back view outside. Having left the school building, he was walking towards the sports ground.

It was too early for him to have finished his lunch. He was not the active type who would wolf down his food to rush to the sports ground. Even though he was quite athletic and others might invite him from time to time, in those circumstances, he would always say: "Wait a bit, let me finish this tea first, okay... Hoo~" That was the type of person he was.

There were no signs of the silver-haired girl by his side. Were they patrolling separately? Or was she still having lunch in the classroom?

(Disregarding the child for now... Where is he planning on going by himself...?)

How worrisome. The doll who drained people of their life force might be roaming the school building right now. Acting alone could be risky. In any case, she had to chase after him—

By the time she had changed into her outdoor shoes, Konoha had lost sight of Haruaki. So she decided to leave the school building through the service entrance. Making her way there, she jogged across the corridor.

Naturally, everywhere was filled with the hustle and bustle of the lunch break.

Passing by chatting girls, she almost collided with boys who were running out of the classrooms. There were students playing rock-paper-scissors to decide who would go line up to buy stuff, students calling out to classmates still inside the classrooms, students staring out the windows—

—At this moment, Konoha felt her world overturned.

It was like someone had grabbed her shoulder. It felt like something was being stolen, extracted from her body. Instantly, her consciousness began to fade. As much as she desperately tried to endure, her body failed to respond as if it were a puppet. Even though she was a sword. Her lunchbox, the ceiling, the floor, everything seemed to be spinning around. All she seemed to be hearing was the sound of her own breathing.

"Huh...?"

Incomprehensible. However, her hazy consciousness forced herself to scrutinize what she found incomprehensible.

Like a broken puppet, she forcefully raised her head.

Her view was dominated by shimmering and commotion. The floor. The lunchbox. What a waste. From a distance, someone called out: "Someone fainted!" It could have been nearby but sounded so far away. After that, how many minutes passed? Someone wearing indoor shoes was standing beside her. She saw legs wearing long pants—the noise of commotion intensified—then even more—

Blackout.

"!"

Konoha sat up from the futon. The dim view before her was her own room.

"...Hoo..."

She wiped away her sweat. But in addition to her forehead, her entire body

was drenched with sweat. Then she realized she was naked with a fright. It can't be, perhaps...

Konoha frantically searched her recollections. In a corner of her mind, she found lingering memories from when she turned back into a sword. Due to her half-dazed state, the memories were fuzzy, but she had apparently transformed because she felt too hot to sleep. After understanding the situation, she finally breathed a long sigh of relief.

Her high fever and the sense of heaviness in her body were less serious now, but she was still somewhat exhausted. Indeed, these were signs of recovery. Having regained some mobility, she made use of the washbowl and the towel by the futon to wipe her body.

"Ah... That feels nice..."

Having just woken up, she still felt like she was still halfway in dream land. Konoha recalled the touch of Haruaki's hand when he was placing the towel on her forehead. Indeed, that felt very comfortable too. She suddenly wondered, had she requested him, would he be willing to wipe her body like this—

Who knows, but if he really were to agree, he'd definitely display a troubled expression—Surely, he would wipe gently and it would be such a very comfortable feeling—

Ah! —Konoha realized in shock what she was imagining and blushed. She shook her head vigorously to dispel the imagery. After all, on further thought—could it be possible that he disliked girls with an excessively large bust? She sighed involuntarily and continued with her wiping.

The moisture from the towel seemed to seep into her hazy mind through the skin of her entire body.

She recalled her dream. Through the scenes in the dream she corroborated her memories.

Something bothered her but she could not be certain. After all, one's sense of time within dreams was very ambiguous, it would not be surprising if other unimportant memories were mixed in—but for some reason, something felt concerning.

"Speaking of which... Why would Haruaki-kun...?"

As she puzzled with her head inclined, Konoha heard a rumbling noise coming from her stomach.

"Hmm, excuse me."

A glance at the clock revealed that it was almost dinner time. She recalled Haruaki saying he would cook porridge for her. It would be extra work if he had to deliver it expressly, so she decided to go and wait at the living room—She was definitely not trying to hurry him! That was what she argued to herself.

Putting on her pajamas, she exited the room. Walking was not too much of an exertion.

The sound of talking came from the living room. Fear, Haruaki and someone else.

(Ueno-san...?)

Was it something urgent? Konoha felt puzzled. As the voices grew clearer—

"Then there was what happened today during the lunch break. You were there, Class Rep, so you should already know, right?"

"Only up to the point when you exited the classroom."

"I had already left to patrol, so I have no idea."

"Ah, that's right. Someone had a message delivered to me, asking me to visit the sports ground, so that's why I went out there without finishing my lunch... That someone was Sovereignty. Then I had a conversation with her, separated by a fence."

I see. Just as Konoha was about to accept his statement—

The sense of inconsistency in her memory roared out:

That is completely impossible!

By the time she realized, she had already rushed into the living room.

"I-Is what you say really true, Haruaki-kun? If that's the case, it's really too strange...!"

"Woah! What's with you, Konoha? Are you alright now—"

She interrupted Haruaki and continued. What had happened seemed completely impossible.

"Sovereignty was waiting for you by the sports ground, and Haruaki-kun, you only went out after being summoned—If that really is the case, then how was I attacked inside the school building when I started following only after spotting you outside?"

Part 6

"I was going to wait until you got up before asking you... But now given what you said, it's really strange. The order is reversed—The doll, who was supposed to be waiting at the sports ground, attacked Konoha while I was still on my way there. And to think I was convinced you had been attacked as soon as lunch started."

"Sorry, I was in a daze until just now, so I couldn't think straight... But having slept, I started recalling the situation back then."

Konoha shrugged apologetically, but Kirika shook her head and said:

"How could we rouse a patient for questioning? This is not your fault. The key point is—At a critical moment, we have obtained an additional significant fact."

"I don't get it. So what is the conclusion?"

Fear pursed her lips. As expected, the academically excellent class representative was the reliable one instead.

"If we think about it, there are three main possibilities... One, she rushed to the scene after draining Konoha's life force. Two, the doll possesses another ability we are unaware of, which is what she used—such as controlling other puppets from a distance to absorb life force. And three—"

Kirika put up three fingers then sighed.

"She has an accomplice with the same ability to absorb life force—These are basically the possibilities."

"...!"

Haruaki gasped. Then he offered his opinion:

"The first one is kind of a stretch, right...?"

"Agreed. A tool on a doll's level doesn't really seem like it could have any kind

of instantaneous transport ability. Besides, if she could do that, she would have used it from the start. That doll isn't even used to a human body yet."

"We're simply listing the possibilities. So based on the facts—I would agree with you two."

"And likewise for the second possibility. Don't forget, it was during the lunch break. It would have been impossible to walk along the classroom hallways without being seen. Whether Sovereignty herself or a remote controlled doll, both would be spotted."

"Indeed. Then that means—"

The conversation paused. Instead, only the sound of four people sipping tea with awkward expressions remained. After a while—

"Process of elimination... For the purpose of theorizing, it's not exactly a smart method."

"But the chances are quite high. We cannot ignore this possibility."

"So, who is it? Konoha, did you catch a glimpse of who did it?"

"No—As soon as someone touched my shoulder from behind, I immediately collapsed. But, well..."

She shrank her head back timidly.

"When I fell down, I think there was a boy standing next to me... I saw pants. But I could be mistaken. The person might have ran over after seeing me collapse. My consciousness was in a mess back then..."

"Hmm... A boy eh... Yachi, do you remember what those two idiots said during lunch?"

"Eh? Uh—what they talked about back then, let's see... The Chloroform Baron and also... Ah, the deceased male student's ghost—?"

"What did Kana say? There was a witness—perhaps it's not a baseless rumor."

"In other words—the doll has an accomplice mixed in the school, a boy who can absorb life force. Then what? How do we find him?"

Haruaki pondered in puzzlement. Konoha asked with trepidation:

"Somehow it seems like my impression has been accepted as fact, is that really okay...?"

"We can't simply dismiss it as a mistake, right? Besides, we don't have any other reliable information..."

"Just as Yachi said. Anyway, we can only take action based on facts and hypotheses—that said, there is still not enough information. Namely, is there anyone we could question..."

"Eh? How so?"

"Although I called the other person who drained life force an 'accomplice' but that in itself raises questions. Simply stated, when and where did Sovereignty find this accomplice? A long time ago back when she was in foreign lands, after she escaped from the antique shop, or some time in between, while she was still at the shop?"

"I see what you mean now. It's hard to imagine a former companion coming all the way to this distant island country. I don't think she could have met someone after escaping either. In that case, it must be during her time at the antique shop... After all, in a place like that, a gathering of her kind would not be surprising."

"Right, so that's why I wondered if there's someone we could question."

Of course, there was the antique shopkeeper's daughter—Shiraho.

As for the other culprit, do you have any idea? Is there another doll? No, it might not even be a doll, has anything strange disappeared from the shop as well? So many questions to confirm with her. Based on the situation, perhaps there was a need to visit Shiraho's shop. Records of what had been bought and sold, some of that should still remain in the shop.

"In other words, our plan for tomorrow involves finding Shiraho first for questioning? Then please accompany us then, Class Rep. So long as we explain you're here to help, there should be no problem."

"Of course."

With that, their plans were set. Just as Haruaki relaxed his shoulders—

Growl~

An extremely adorable sound was heard.

"It's already this late eh... That's right, eating rice crackers alone isn't quite enough. I'm about to prepare dinner, so please be patient a little while longer, Fear. Oh yeah, Class Rep, why don't you stay for dinner before you head back?"

"Wha...!"

"If you would allow it, then by all means please let me stay. This would be a great opportunity to steal some of your cooking secrets... But if you don't have enough ingredients, don't force yourself, okay? Spying on the enemy would not be worth it if it ends up incurring Fear's wrath."

"Wait... Wait a minute! Not me, it wasn't me, okay!?"

Slam! Fear got to her feet, smoldering as if she was about to combust.

"Of course, it's not your fault, Fear, just that huge stomach. Don't be so angry. It's nothing to be ashamed of."

"I already told you it wasn't me, okay!? Believe me. Hey, dummy! I'll curse you!"

"Oh, Konoha, you'll have to be a little patient too! I've already prepared the ingredients for your portion, the nutritious porridge I promised you. Eat it and get well soon!"

"Yeah... Yeah..."

For some reason, Konoha was red in the face, her head bowed deeply and trembling.

Just as Haruaki prepared to make his way to the kitchen, he heard something amidst Fear's continued grumbling—

"...There are still some questions in the details. Perhaps I'm over thinking things, but it doesn't make sense. I'll have to ask Shiraho properly..."

Kirika was musing to herself. Because she sounded especially serious, her words left a particularly strong impression on him.

It looked like the next day was going to be quite eventful. But enlisting Kirika's

help was as good as obtaining a hundred volunteers. In any case, leaving the thinking to her would be fine. Now, what kind of tasty cooking should he come up with to energize her—

Thinking that, Haruaki put his full effort into the meal. With just a single mouthful, Kirika exclaimed "So far to go before catching up...!" Then she hung her head in despair, only moving her chopsticks in dejection.

With that, a busy day came to an end.

The next day, Shiraho did not come to school.

Part 7

"Oh—She seems to have skipped school! ...Reason? N-No one would know, right? Because she doesn't seem to have any friends... Anyway, isn't it quite weird for someone who had refused to come to school all this time to show up suddenly? Besides, all she did was sit there staring into empty space without even taking her textbooks out. There must be something going on with her, right? She also maintains her distance from everyone else—"

During the morning break, they had grabbed a student from Shiraho's class and that was what he said.

Haruaki, Kirika and Fear walked along the corridors side by side. Konoha, on the other hand, stayed home with sick leave. I can already walk normally, don't worry—She originally wanted to come to school, but just to be safe, Haruaki made her call in sick and rest at home.

"...Somehow I have a bad feeling about this."

Kirika murmured softly. Haruaki nodded in agreement. After all, school was where Sovereignty was most likely to be found. Also, Shiraho had said, now that her father was gone, she had to pull herself together from now on. It was hard to imagine why she would be absent without notice.

"It's possible she's simply sick with a flu and unable to contact the school."

"But we can't rule out the possibility of something unusual—We just need to check, right? Anyway, let's see if we can give her a call or something."

Fear's suggestion was uncharacteristically modern for her.

Naturally, no one in her class knew how to contact her. Hence they tried the phone book at the public telephone in front of the school office. But it did not even contain a single instance of the rare family name, Sakuramairi. In that case, they had no choice but to attempt calling every antique shop in the

neighboring town. In the end, that ended fruitlessly as well.

"Damn it, I should have asked for her phone number last time. At least we know the name of the shop, so we can visit her after school—Oh right, let's ask the superintendent!"

"Didn't that guy go abroad?"

"He's got a cellphone. Even though I don't have the number, I'm sure we can just ask Zenon-san."

Hence, during the break after the next period, they all went to the superintendent's office. But since Kirika's true identity was not known to the superintendent, she stayed outside the room on standby. The instant he knocked, Haruaki wondered if Zenon might be patrolling the school but luckily she happened to be inside.

With her usual cool demeanor, she replied:

"—Most regrettably, it seems like he's not in reception range. I am most sorry I cannot be of help. Speaking of help, I currently have no choice but to handle all this piled up paperwork, so please understand this objective truth, for I am not slacking off from helping out the insufficient security personnel. Of course, once all this paperwork is handled, I will join in to help out with security. After all, there has been an increase of unnecessary work due to the unusual occurrences. If they're not handled properly, indeed normal operations will be affected—"

Translation—The call did not go through. I am very busy, is there any other business?

"...Sorry for disturbing you."

Her own desk should be in the adjoining room but the superintendent's desk was currently piled high with documents. Clearly she was quite busy—disturbing her would be bad. Just as he was walking out of the room with Fear, Haruaki suddenly noticed the strange straw hat hanging on the clothing stand beside the door.

"Oh, that's strange... It doesn't match this room at all! Who could have left it there?"

"I think it belongs to Zenon."

"You really shouldn't make unfounded statements of that sort! How should I put it, that totally doesn't match..."

"I wasn't making an unfounded statement, okay?"

Saying that, they left the superintendent's office. Zenon bowed politely to see them off—But somehow, Haruaki felt like her shoulder was twitching during the process, was it his imagination?

"So, what next? Are we out of options?"

"Uh... No, not yet. Isn't there some kind of class contact network thing? If we say it's for visiting a sick student, the homeroom teacher should tell us, right?"

Haruaki was just about to congratulate himself on a good idea and Kirika, who had been waiting outside, seemed to agree at first, but—

"Hmm... Wait a minute, I remember her being in the Seventh Class... That's a bit problematic..."

Almost instantly, she began to murmur to herself.

"Class Rep, is there a problem?"

"Not exactly a problem, but—I would advise against asking that class' homeroom teacher to allow us to check the contact network. First of all, we have a student who had never showed up to school previously. Then suddenly some people from another class show up, especially people who aren't particularly close to her, asking to visit her. That's totally unnatural. If possible, I think a more discreet method would be better."

"That sounds reasonable, but even if you insist on a more discreet method..."

"'If possible' was what I said. If there's no other way, then we are left with no choice... What do you say?"

For some reason, Kirika lowered her gaze as if feeling guilty. At this time, Fear tilted her head in surprise and spoke up:

"I don't quite get it, but all we need is the address and telephone number, right? If that's the case, what about that thing I filled in the day before

yesterday? Wasn't it said that everyone had to fill one in?"

"What thing?"

"The thing the superintendent asked me to fill when he took my photo. Something about a medical history for the infirmary. The address and telephone number should be on it, right?"

"Oh yeah, nice idea! Well done, Fear!"

"Hmph, praise me more!"

With her nose in the air, Fear's chest swelled with pride. As always, she really was a girl with the myriad expressions.

"Indeed, Fear-kun's method can be carried out discreetly. Perfect... Anyway, break time is almost over, let's do it during lunch!"

"Why would it be discreet?"

"Oh, the school physician—Ganon-san is the elder sister of Zenon-san. She's someone on the superintendent's side, so we can ask her to keep things secret through Zenon-san. Let's ask her now while we're here!"

Thus they entered the superintendent's office again. The instant the door was opened—

"...Doesn't match..."

Head bowed, Zenon was staring blankly at the straw hat in her hand. Expressionless as always, but somehow her face seemed slightly lonesome. And the instant she noticed Haruaki and Fear—Whoosh! She swiftly destroyed the evidence by stuffing the straw hat into the trash can over on the side. Her speed was so fast it seemed like afterimages would be left behind.

Did we witness something we were not supposed to see? Haruaki and Fear exchanged glances. With absolute calm—or perhaps feigned composure, Zenon took out a very plain beret and put it on her head before their eyes. Then she narrowed her eyes and stared at Haruaki.

"The paperwork has been handled. I was just about to go out on patrol... Do you need something?"

Somehow, she seemed subtly angry.

Next came the lunch break. There were no student fainting incidents today yet. Fear sat restlessly in her seat, wanting to go out and patrol, but there was something to be done first. After rapidly finishing their lunch, Haruaki and his group went to the infirmary. The one who answered the door was—

"Coming~ ...Please come in~"

A lethargic voice. Leaving Kirika outside once again, Haruaki and Fear entered the room to find waiting for them a person whose lethargic posture matched her voice perfectly. With sleepy eyes, she was playing a jigsaw puzzle. Chewing on a Pocky biscuit stick, she skillfully suppressed a yawn. Dressed in a shabby white coat, glasses perched on the top of her head—this was the usual appearance of the school physician, Houjyou Ganon.

"How should I say this... Totally lacking in drive. Hey, Haruaki, is she really the school physician? Not some student wearing a white coat and skipping class?"

"Very regrettably, she is undoubtedly the school physician. I have never seen her in a motivated state. Whether it's pay day or any other occurrence, she's always like this. Conversely, isn't that actually quite amazing?"

Haruaki secretly whispered to Fear. But Ganon seemed to have overheard.

"No way~ This is actually a high level strategy! The infirmary is a place of healing, a place where relaxation and a sense of reassurance are paramount... I am simply embodying the ideal! In other words, I don't do this by choice—Oh my, feigning laziness is so tiring. Is there a better way?"

Unable to understand what she was talking about, Haruaki watched as Ganon lazily swiveled her chair to face him.

"Yes~ Yachi and Cubrick from Second Class, right? I heard from Zenon already. The health survey forms are on the shelves over there, arranged by class in alphabetical order.^[5] Please put it back properly once you're done, okay~"

That was all she said before boredly going back to her jigsaw puzzle. How befitting of sisters, they were so similar in the manner they acted as they

wished—Fear stared in amazement as she murmured to herself.

"Whatever. Haruaki, let's hurry and get this over with!"

"Ah yeah."

Haruaki and Fear began to search the shelves indicated by Ganon. Very quickly, they found their target—

In that very instant.

"Wha—"

The whole world was turned upside down.

"Huh? Is there something really interesting? Why do you keep staring... By the way, I'm not that free, you know? Please leave as soon as you're done~"

Free enough to be playing a puzzle, Ganon interrupted. Haruaki and Fear remained rooted to the spot. Unable to move.

They did manage to find what they were looking for. All the essential information was found.

Fear stared silently at the piece of paper in Haruaki's hand.

Sakuramairi Shiraho.

Her address.

Her telephone number.

All were written there.

Since it was handed in together with the enrollment application, therefore even though she had refused to attend school, her personal information was written there without error—Indeed.

Essential information.

Even the nonessential—what they never regarded as essential was also there.

"What is... Going on?"

No one could answer Haruaki's question.

Not Fear. Nor Ganon as she played her puzzle indifferently.

Next to the name field where Sakuramairi Shiraho was written, the attached photo showed—

Beautiful long hair as if artificially crafted. Exquisite facial features like a doll's. Gazing at the camera without smiling at all. The face of the girl Haruaki and the rest had been calling Sovereignty—No one could give an answer.



ら、見、据、え、て、い、る、今、ま、で、春、亮、達、が、サ、ヴ、エ、レ、ン、テ、イ、と、呼、ん、で、い、た、少、女、の、顔、も、——答、え、な、い、。

Chapter 4 - Like an Inescapable Curse / "She played Killing Organ"

Part 1

Even though Haruaki and his group had no idea what was going on, at least it was clear this was no time to be casually attending class. Skipping the lessons in the afternoon, they rushed out of the school, making their way towards the Shiraho address obtained from the health survey earlier. Since the location was in the neighboring town, their first destination was the station.

"Hey, what's going on? Isn't that girl Sovereignty?"

"I don't get it either...! But she's the one depicted in Shiraho's photo, that's absolutely certain!"

"Then Yachi, supposing the person in the photo is 'the true Shiraho,' then naturally there exists someone else as the 'true doll,' right?"

This was obvious, and the most likely candidate was—

Haruaki looked at Fear running beside him. Supposing that was true, had this girl not realized it?

(No... It was also possible.)

He recalled back when Konoha was scrutinizing the mask the superintendent handed over to her. Even cursed tools like her and Fear had no certain method of discerning other cursed tools and only relied on intuition. In that case, through accomplished acting skills, it was possible to deceive them— "Didn't I mention, there were other minor points of suspicion? Perhaps they may end up

being trivial, but I find them bothering."

Having reached the station, Kirika spoke as they went up the stairs. She held down her skirt firmly—in order to prevent others from seeing what was strictly concealed.

"Which points?"

"Suspicious points regarding her movements. A student who did not attend class coming to school to search for a doll. Even if we take this for granted, then—Why didn't she visit the superintendent's office as soon as she came to school? Why was she loitering outside the dressmaking room during the lunch break?"

"Uwah! There's this thing blocking my path!"

Haruaki had given Fear the train ticket earlier but then he recalled he had not taught her how to use it. Rescuing Fear who was stuck and struggling in the ticket turnstile, Haruaki nodded to the surprised station staff as they rushed towards the platform, sliding in the train just as it arrived.

"Hoo... Hah... Now that you mention it, Class Rep, that is quite true."

Being one station away, the trip to their destination only offered brief respite to catch their breaths. Perhaps because it was in the middle of the day, the train was rather empty. The trio sat side by side on a bench.

"But don't you find it strange? After all, Shiraho was wearing a uniform on her first day."

"That doll—The doll-like girl was wearing a fluttering outfit, on the other hand."

"You guys did mention that. In that case, it does make the photo the point of inconsistency instead—But then again, let me ask a question. Does anyone know what the doll was wearing when it was first delivered?"

"No..."

Since no one had opened the case after it was delivered to the superintendent's office, then no one witnessed it. The only person who knew would be Shiraho who saw the doll before it was stuffed into the suitcase.

"But simply wearing casual clothes does not imply she is the doll. Conversely the same."

"Mmm... So, does that mean she dressed the doll in a uniform from the very start? Is that possible?"

The train slowed down. Getting up and grabbing the hanging ring-shaped handhold, Kirika said: "Hard to say. After some contemplation, my conclusion is—the doll was not wearing clothes when first brought here."

"How would you know?"

"Just a hypothesis. I simply recalled suddenly... During the first term, didn't we have home economics lessons in the dressmaking room? Back then, there was one time I had to enter the preparation room to do something. I remember seeing a female uniform inside there. I'm not sure if it was supposed to be used for a class or left behind as a souvenir by a crafts club alumnus—In any case, uniforms can also be easily obtained in school."

As soon as the train stopped, they rushed out onto the platform.

They had just exited the station when Kirika said "Please wait for me briefly" and ran into a convenience store. Several seconds later, she returned with a map she bought. Confirming the copied address on the map, Haruaki and his group started running again.

"B-But isn't that a little contrived—It's just your own speculation, right?"

"Of course it's just speculation. In addition, finding socks and indoor shoes would also required a certain amount of luck, not to mention a set of underwear... But then again, the lack of underwear isn't so easily seen, so that's not a problem."

Haruaki exclaimed in surprise in his thoughts. Beneath that drenched uniform, what had he seen?

He then recalled several things. Her awkward smile when confessing she did not even have enough money for a cup of juice. If Kirika's hypothesis was correct, then her purse was not simply in a pinch, she was completely penniless instead. Also when exiting the school building after discovering the bronze statue, she was quite sluggish in getting to the front steps. Was she looking for

the right size shoes— "..."

The conversation gradually trailed off as they ran as fast as they could. In order to obtain answers— Finally they arrived. Opposite to their destination was an old fashioned confectionery store. Dumping the map into the trash can in front of the store, Kirika spoke: "Now that we are here, it'd be useless to agonize over unanswered questions. Let's hurry and get answers directly from the one who actually knows, okay?"

"I agree completely, Kirika. If... Yeah, if our current speculation is correct—I want to question her directly."

Fear bowed her head slightly, expressing her reluctance to accept the speculation.

Haruaki felt the same. If possible, he did not wish to believe. But they had no choice but to confirm.

"The problem is whether she's really here..."

This was a town that was somewhat remote from the city center. Neither residential nor commercial entirely, it felt like people simply built tea houses or laundry stores here and there on whim.

The antique shop building had two stories and seemed to act as both shop and home. The front was divided in half between the shuttered storefront and a normal entryway. The shop's name on the worn out sign was completely unreadable, so it would probably have been futile if they tried to ask for directions using the shop's name.

"Okay, let's go! Press the doorbell! If no one answers, let's crash through the door!"

"Yeah right, not allowed!"

Haruaki pressed down firmly on Fear's head. This little child could not be left unsupervised for even an instant—Once again he was reminded of this fact.

"Although we have no idea what's the situation on the other side, do you really think she'll come out obediently with a press of the doorbell? Even if she's inside, your doing so would be equivalent to screaming at her to flee!"

"Indeed, it would be troublesome if approaching straight from the front causes a commotion. This place is quite conspicuous—Let's go around the back first?"

Mmm—despite whining in protest, Fear did not voice her objections.

Squeezing between walls to make their way to the back, they found a spacious clearing large enough for kids to play baseball. This soft grassland, filled with weeds, must have been cultivated as farmland once. Tall and towering trees surrounded this space like a fence, so there was no need to worry about seen by neighboring residents.

Kirika looked up towards the back of the Shiraho residence.

"Let's clarify our aims. I'm going to state this plainly. It is very likely that the girl you've been treating as Shiraho is actually the true «Sovereignty Perfection Doll»."

"I admit... Indeed that's quite likely."

"As much as I don't want to believe it, the circumstances leave me no choice but to consider the possibility. Seriously—that Cow Tits said something about seeing a boy, isn't that completely off!?"

"But the fact that 'it was a student' is consistent. Regardless, even though we don't understand the whole situation, this does mean that the two of them cooperated to deceive you guys. Don't be surprised if you're attacked on sight, so be careful... Okay, just for the sake of caution, let's enter from the window? Things cannot progress until we start investigating from the home."

Kirika pointed to the window on the second floor's verandah where lowered curtains prevented them from seeing inside. The silver hair bobbed up and down— "I have no objections."

"Hmm, I guess there's no other way... But how are we getting up there?"

Kirika answered by extending a black belt from her right sleeve—the «Tragic Black River».

"Got it. Thanks. Oh but she's quite heavy, will it be alright? It could break, you know—"

"Y-You! What are you saying!? I-I'm fine, I can jump over this height easily! Rather, I'm sure even if Kirika helped me up there she won't feel burdened or troubled at all, but I just want to save her effort, that's all!"

"Woah, don't be so loud! If you jump and end up wrecking the verandah then we'd really have a problem! We must enter discreetly—"

Or else it would be meaningless—But just as Haruaki was about to finish his sentence...

His words became completely redundant.

They heard the acute sound of something breaking and shattering coming from the interior of the house. Furthermore, it sounded like the source was the room they were looking at. Signs of alarm instantly appeared on everyone's face— "There's no time to waste on talking—Haruaki, I'm going to jump!"

"Wait... Don't use the princess carry!"

"—«Tragic Black River»!"

Fear picked up Haruaki and leaped, causing the verandah to creak as if about to shatter. Entangling the railing on the verandah with the black belt from her arm, Kirika rose through the air like a bilboquet,^[6] performing a somersault in midair and landing on the verandah.

The glass window was not locked. Rushing into the room at once, they were met with the sight of— "...Eh?"

It was beyond their understanding.

Completely counter to predictions.

No amount of prediction could have expected this.

On various levels, it was completely mind boggling.

The room was dimly lit. A shattered vase lay on the floorboards in the depths of the room, near two figures.

"Cough... Ack...!"

Sovereignty—or rather, the true Shiraho, her face so exquisite it almost seemed artificial, was suspended with her feet in the air, pressed against the

wall. Someone's hand was choking her by the neck. Only now did Haruaki witness for the first time a human expression of suffering on Shiraho's face. The front of her usual outfit was slightly open, revealing a shoulder as white as porcelain.

And the one committing attempted murder against her—

A handsome youth with a feminine face. A strange youth. An inexplicable youth.

He was wearing a short skirt, dressed in a female uniform. His shirt was unbuttoned, exposing a loose and almost falling brassiere as well as a flat chest — The youth's left hand was strangling Shiraho's throat. The two of them were pressed so closely together, they almost seemed locked in embrace. As for his right hand, it was positioned as if caressing her chin. With a flash, Haruaki witnessed a cold sharp blade emerge from his palm as if cutting open his right hand—



"Not yet, still no good... Still... It's okay... Rather... Please, stop... Stop...!"

The youth bowed his head and kept repeating these words as if about to vomit blood from agonizing sorrow.

Haruaki was the only one who stood in shock. Without seeking to understand the situation, the other two sprang into action.

"Mechanism No.8 crushing type, circular form: «Breaking Wheel of Francia», Curse Calling!"

"«Tragic Black River»!"

The thrown breaking wheel. The extending strangling belt.

Only then did the youth became aware of the intruders, suddenly leaping away from Shiraho. The belt struck his former position while the breaking wheel crashed into the wall behind, cracking it. Shiraho coughed violently and collapsed to the floor.

Fear and Kirika pulled back their weapons. The youth wrapped his arms around himself. Head bowed, the eyes visible beneath his dangling hair displayed a hollow gaze.

"Ah... Ooh... A-Ah... T-Thank you... to you all..."

These words were also incomprehensible.

Fear gripped her retrieved breaking wheel in a stance and glared sternly as she asked: "—Who are you?"

"Eh... You don't recognize me looking like this...? Well then—"

Whispering, the youth suddenly placed his hands on his chest and moved them around as if groping something.

With a series of brief breaths, in the next instant, his chest began to expand.

"Wha...!"

"Massaging them makes them bigger... Just like I said..."

Then he stuffed his chest into the mispositioned bra. Grabbing his head with both hands, he tugged at his hair—without tearing it off. Instead, the hair simply extended smoothly.

Standing there was no longer a youth but something with female form.

Up until now, the one Haruaki and the rest had called Sakuramairi Shiraho—«Sovereignty Perfection Doll».

Her expression was unlike any she had displayed in the past. There was neither the airheaded shyness nor the forced smile. Currently, her face only expressed bottomless gloom and emptiness.

"Shiraho—or rather, you're really Sovereignty... Right? You're actually...! What is going on!?"

"Correct... I am the «Sovereignty Perfection Doll». Perfection is perfect, hence perfection. I am the doll created for the purpose of fulfilling the owner's desires—Since it is impossible to know beforehand the owner's gender, as a doll of perfection it is only natural that I possess functions for accommodating both. Since my original form resembles a human greatly, therefore when I take human form I still retain the taboo ability of gender alteration."

That was how she was created—She explained.

Both a male and a female doll at the same time.

Created only for the purpose of fulfilling human desires—

Androgynous.

"That's not what I'm asking you about! What were you doing? Last time when you encouraged me you were lying to me—Were you deceiving me!? Why!?"

Fake Shiraho—Sovereignty trembled slightly. Covering her lowered face with her left palm, she spoke in a slightly hoarse voice: "Lying... Yes, I deceived you. That is the truth. How rare... To make a friend... But, but...!"

Haruaki did not understand completely, but he could not let himself stand there in shock indefinitely.

"Sovereignty... May I call you that? We won't harm you, so please just tell us the full story. About swapping identities, absorbing life force, as well as what you were doing to her just now..."

"No..."

She forced herself as if vomiting her words.

"...No. My... curse... does not actually drain life force... W-What I am compelled to do is..."

She turned her head in fright to gaze at the girl sitting collapsed on the floor.

"Sovereignty—"

"...A-Ahhhhhh...!"

As they gazed at each other, Shiraho called out that name while Sovereignty bent over to hold down her own hand. From her hand, the blade that only emerged halfway earlier began to fully extend with a series of creaking sounds — "...Ah! It's already... No good... Stop it!"

Sovereignty suddenly turned and ran away from the door in Shiraho's direction, towards the window where Haruaki and the rest had entered.

Faced with the sudden attack, Fear reflexively threw the wheel, but Sovereignty bent herself low and ducked under it. With a hollow expression as if suppressing pain and on the verge of tears, she approached Haruaki who was standing behind Fear.

"Wait, please stop, can't we just talk—"

"Get out of the way... You're in danger if you don't move aside...!"

Haruaki did not even have the to go "Eh?" and ponder.

Sovereignty's bladed right hand was fast approaching like martial arts palm strike. This is bad, I'm definitely gonna be stabbed and it looks painful! Eh? Something is pulling me... "Yachi!" Falling over, he found someone standing in his place, only to have her chest violently violated by that blade— "Guaah!"

Sovereignty's eyes wavered for an instant, but then she immediately withdrew her blade from Kirika's chest and rushed out the window.

"K-Kirika! Hang on there!"

"Class Rep!"

Too occupied to chase after Sovereignty, Haruaki frantically rushed over to Kirika's side. The bleeding was very severe due to the blade piercing the center

of her chest, most likely injuring her heart—Desperately suppressing the tumultuous thoughts that seemed to almost explode from his skull, Haruaki decided to stop the bleeding first and tore open her uniform.

Only to find her wound regenerating as if time was rewinding—

Counter to the laws of nature, her flesh began to close up. The warm liquid gushing from the long incision was slowly recalled back into the body, granting greater visibility to the throbbing pink hole. Until the wound recovered completely, the exceptional healing ability persisted nonstop— "Ack... Don't... worry. You forgot? I cannot die, because of this."

"Oh yeah... Now that you mention it, that's right. Because it was too sudden, I went into a panic. But..."

"But it still hurts, right? Kirika, don't speak and rest first."

Kirika wore beneath her clothes a bondage style outfit—«Gimestorante's Love». Cursed with instant death to the wearer upon disrobement, this was a Wathe that healed all external injuries as long as it was worn.

Haruaki had witnessed its effects before. Nevertheless, upon seeing a girl he knew lying on the floor as she bled, he was unable to stop worrying until she recovered. On an emotional level, he could not dispel his unease...

As Haruaki stared unerringly for the wound to heal, Kirika spoke hesitantly: "Y-Yachi—My wound will finish healing in an instant. Perhaps to you this might not be anything unusual, but... Umm... Personally to me... It felt like someone had stripped off my clothes to peek at my underwear..."

"Eh? Uwah, I'm really sorry!"

With her uniform torn open, vast areas of her skin was exposed, although her breasts were barely covered by the erotic bondage suit. Haruaki frantically turned his gaze away.

"I'm glad that Kirika will be fine... So, you're the real Shiraho? I have many questions for you."

Fear spoke up. Still sitting on the ground, Shiraho looked up at her. After biting her lip for a moment, she quietly said with a seemingly inorganic voice: "I

too, have a question."

"What is it?"

"Will you kill Sovereignty?"

Shiraho's gaze turned to Fear's wheel of torture. Truly ominous, truly frightening, a simple glance was enough to ascertain—That was a tool created for murder, and in actual fact, it had indeed slain numerous victims. A painful mechanism meant to inflict pain.

Fear and Haruaki exchanged glances silently. The answer was obvious and needed no words to explain.

But before these two could say anything in response, as if these few short seconds were unbearable, Shiraho bowed her head and with a weak and trembling voice, pleaded from the depths of her heart— "I beg you, please don't kill Sovereignty!"

"Hmph, that's a really weird thing for you to say. Even disregarding our opinion for a second, you do remember you were almost killed, right? Wouldn't most people feel fear or hate instead?"

"I don't. Because there are extenuating circumstances."

"What circumstances?"

"...Sovereignty's curse. Just as she said, it does not steal life force from others. That is simply a forced application of her 'normal ability.' The true curse of the Sovereignty Perfection Doll is—"

Shiraho clenched the carpet in her fist.

"«To cause the owner to love her unto death»."

Standing before Shiraho as she sat on the ground, Haruaki extended his hand.

"We won't kill her. I promise you, as a fellow human. Therefore—please tell us the details."

"...I have deceived you all. Except for one thing."

Smack! She swatted away the hand in front of her.

"I hate humans, human. Even if you say it so easily, I do not believe you."

Glared at by her starry eyes, Haruaki shrank back slightly.

"Then let me say it—I won't kill her. As her fellow cursed tool, I promise you. So please tell us the details."

This time it was Fear who extended her hand. With mild surprise, Shiraho stared at her.

"...You really mean it?"

"Yes, I really mean it, human."

Fear grabbed Shiraho's hand forcefully and pulled her to to her feet. Smooth as doll's, hers was a warm human hand.

Shiraho's eyes seemed to be saying—Don't you dare deceive me.

(Ah I see—She really doesn't want that doll to die.)

Fear suddenly thought to herself.

Why doesn't she want someone who almost killed her to die?

Incomprehensible.

Consequently, Fear wondered if the answer lay in one of those terms she was likewise unable to comprehend.

Indeed, the circumstances brought up by Shiraho included something Fear had yet to understand— —The word known as love.

Part 2

People were always praising me: "This child is truly as beautiful as a doll!" That was also how my mother doted upon me. On the other hand, my father was apparently uninterested in dolls. Perhaps due to these circumstances, all I can say is, by the time I realized, I had already turned out like this.

Living to this day, I always felt as if I was not human.

When I was a child, my mother once took me to theatrical troupe, to have me learn acting skills.

It was truly simple. After all, dolls were made to imitate people.

I could not muster any enthusiasm. On my end I simply invested minimal effort but somehow the audience were always roused to a commotion. Prodigy. Golden Egg. Future Great Actress. A whole slew of trite titles.

In contrast to the fanaticism around me, my heart gradually froze.

What exactly had they seen? What did these people see that roused them into a commotion? Me as an actress? Or the fictional character I interpreted and conveyed? At the very least, I felt that it was not directed towards myself. If one had to ask why, it was because no one ever noticed what I was thinking about.

To be moved simply by superficially expressed sorrow? How trite.

To be enraptured simply by superficially expressed smiles? How naive.

I was again taken to the theatrical troupe several times after that, but it was utterly inane, so I stopped acting. Even when forcefully shoved onto the stage, I simply stood there motionless. Faced with the surrounding pleas, snarls and tears, all I could think was: How noisy. If you want something that perfectly imitates a human, why not simply prepare a doll?

My mother fell into depression. Apparently she had hoped for her dress-up doll, me, to win the hearts of the entire Japanese audience. As always, my father remained indifferent. Rumors of what happened at the theatrical troupe also spread to school and for some reason, I became hated, ostracized and rejected.

Please leave me alone.

Why approach us on purpose then complain? Why act so high and mighty? Stop looking down on others! Don't think others will suffer your arrogance just because you're pretty! The way you consider yourself different is very aggravating! Etc *etc*.

I am a doll, you people are humans. Having differences is only natural.

The unchanging environment made me feel helpless and disappointed. I soon became completely jaded.

Henceforth, I hated humans.

Then my mother passed away due to illness. Uninterested in dolls, my father did not interact with me. Even though he managed to get me enrolled into high school, I suppose it was only an act of propriety as a show to society? It simply felt meddlesome to me. My father was uninterested in me, and I was uninterested in humans.

Whenever the human who shared the same roof went out, I took walks inside the shop. I enjoyed the taste of antiques. The taste of objects abandoned by humans gave me a sense of homecoming.

On one occasion, the one who struck up conversation with me was— A doll. Human-sized, almost mistakable for human from a distance, a truly beautiful doll. Its material was incredibly soft and warm, its joints could move, and the seams could not be discerned without careful examination. It spoke. Then without much change in appearance, it took on human form.

Very incredibly, I did not feel fear. So this was actually possible—I simply accepted the fact.

A doll who was like a human and a human who was like a doll. I felt that we were quite well matched.

"If you continue staying here, you will be sold off. If you wish to become my conversation partner, you could come to my room."

The doll—in a youth's form at the time—smiled sorrowfully: "I am very glad to know you wish to become my owner. However... It's better if you don't. Because I am cursed."

"Given the current situation, it comes as no shock to me. What will happen?"

"You will fall in love with me."

"My, aren't you confident?"

"No... This is predestined. It will happen. That is the kind of curse I bear."

Sovereignty Perfection Doll began to tell his story.

It all began with the creator's beliefs. The creator believed that the true nature of playing with dolls was rooted in sovereignty. Why did people want dolls? The fundamental answer was—so long as one had a doll in hand, anyone could fulfill their dreams as a sovereign king/prince/queen/princess in a fairy tale. Simply stated, it stemmed from a wish to transform oneself into a perfect human akin to royalty—playing out the fantasy of "an ideal self different from oneself." According to Sovereignty, all playing with dolls originated from that.

The exploits of princes or princesses appearing in stories—namely, romance.

Hence a desire for dolls. One person cannot play out a fairy tale romance alone, hence a desire for dolls. A princess for a prince, and a prince for a princess. The doll's role is to play the part of the romantic partner, the corresponding sovereign queen/princess/king/prince. With that, only the possession of all required elements of a fairy tale romance could stand as proof of a perfect doll. The ability to accommodate all desires of humans existing in fairy tales was exactly the requirement for a doll of perfection.

Consequently, he acquired an appearance that allowed for immersive ecstasy, eyes that generated a sense of being, soft gentle lips for kissing, supple skin for a comforting tight embrace throughout the night, as well as various essential mechanisms.

Not only that—An ending must be prepared for the prince and princess' tragic

romance. Having been crowned with the title of perfection, one was obliged to act out the ending of a transient and beautiful romance.

In the end, the creator went mad—That was what Sovereignty said.

Otherwise, a doll that realized love and death simultaneously could not have been created.

"I am equipped with the mechanism called the Killing Organ. This body is designed to conceal countless blades. When the love between the owner and me reaches a critical point, the mechanism is activated autonomously. «Embrace Only Once»—the first and last deadly embrace. That is how the romance terminates."

His emotionless gaze pierced his hand.

"Simply stated, when the owner and I are deeply infatuated with each other, naturally love comes with embrace. After embracing numerous times—Eventually one day, blades will emerge from this body to kill the owner I am embracing. Because this system is very special, no one can control it except for the creator. Even after having obtained human traits from my curse, I cannot use willpower to prevent the blades from manifesting. As soon as the opportunity arises, the blades activates, only retracting when the mission is complete."

What kind of mechanism is that? —Shiraho could not understand.

"Who knows. In any case, this is the system formed by the 'curse,' so I have no idea. When I was just a doll, I suppose there was a device somewhere in my body for measuring love. Who knows if it counted the number of embraces for data—even this I do not know. Similarly, you humans are unable to keep a counter of your own heart beats, right?"

New questions. So you're currently different from before? And what is a curse?

He cast his gaze into the distance as soon as he heard the questions, then began to recount his experiences when he was still a tool.

At the time, he was just a beautiful doll, without the special ability to make the owner surrender to love with complete abandon. Nevertheless, attracted by

that beauty, the owners continued to fulfill their dreams, everything went according to the creator's plan, terminating physically with death by the mechanism of «Embrace Only Once». In the instant of death, they would lament and cry out—Why must I die by the hand of such a doll?

"Those people didn't know continued usage would lead to death?"

There was no instruction manual and the Killing Organ only manifested for that single instant. Hence, a rumor soon began to spread, that of a "strange doll whose successive owners were found tragically slain." But the more people sought the doll in spite of the rumors, the more beautiful the doll inexplicably became. Hence, the number of tragedies only increased.

Many people. Many dozens of people.

An unending stream. Whenever the doll entered embrace, it heard painful cries.

You decided this on your own! You dared to deceive me—Such were the victim's dying glares.

"As a result, I was cursed. Cursed—then inflicting the curse of 'causing owners to fall in love unerringly, then murdering them with the Killing Organ without fail' back upon humans. Although the result achieved remained the same... Indeed, perhaps only through the curse did I truly acquire perfection. Because I obtained the power to make humans truly fall in love."

"..."

"Before I was cursed, there existed cases where owners might give me away or simply treat me as decoration to be admired from afar. But after the curse, owners were doomed to a single fate. All would approach me with loving intentions. But no matter what kind of love they bore, at the moment of death they would regain their senses to curse me—Before I knew it, I discovered I had gained the ability to take on human form like this."

Saying that, he smiled sorrowfully again.

"Let's end the story of my past at this point... So that's the way it is. This is for your own good. I'm sorry I talked to you in a moment of carelessness, but if you pretend not to have noticed, you can still avoid a fate of death."

"I've been wondering for just now. Why did you speak out to me?"

Faced with this question, he paused for a moment. Then he replied: "Because you looked very lonely."

Good grief.

"...You're not scared that I would be so frightened as to douse you with oil and incinerate you?"

"True, now that you mention it. It was quite risky indeed—Well, I guess I simply wanted to talk to you."

What a carefree doll. At this moment, I realized it had been a long while since I last relaxed my expression like this.

Nevertheless, I felt embarrassed and turned away.

"My room is this way, follow me."

"Eh? Didn't you hear what I told you? If you stay together with me, you will—"

It was fine.

Even that sort of thing was fine.

"It will be fine."

"...Why?"

He was the same sort of being, just like me.

With me being a doll, he was the first friend I made, one who was a doll.

So it was going to be fine.

With a matter-of-fact expression, I asked him in turn: "Can there be romance between dolls?"

However, I ended up falling in love with him.

In other words—

That made me human.

Part 3

The rays of the setting sun streamed into the living room of the Yachi residence. The room was crowded as never before, with those present being Haruaki, Fear, Kirika, Konoha in pajamas—as well as Shiraho.

Distancing herself from the rest who sat themselves around the table, she was sitting in a corner of the room, knees drawn to her chest, conspicuously establishing a barrier of isolation. All this time while she was recounting how she met Sovereignty, she maintained this posture as she stared at the tatami, moving her lips as if murmuring to herself.

Haruaki bowed down halfway in front of Shiraho to offer her a cup of tea.

"Uh... Here's some tea."

"Not needed."

"Aren't you thirsty?"

"Like I said, not needed...!"

She waved her hand impatiently. "Woah!" Haruaki dodged and retreated, then placed the teacup on the tatami by her feet.

"Then I'll leave it here. Just drink it when you want to."

"I'm not going to drink it."

"That's the miraculous thing about tea, you'll find yourself wanting to drink it involuntarily. When you naturally find yourself with nothing to do, or unsure of what to do, you'll find yourself reaching out without conscious intent. Now that is the charm of tea."

As if saying "what utter nonsense," Shiraho turned her face away.

"What a wasteful girl. Doesn't she know the tasty combo of tea and rice crackers?"

"There's no need to force anyone to drink anything."

"Rice crackers aside, tea is truly tasty. Please drink it before it cools off~"

Finding her advice ignored, Konoha slumped her shoulders in dejection.

"Sniff sniff... And to think I carefully selected these tea leaves..."

"This reminds me. Speaking of Konoha and tea—"

"What is it?"

"Seeing Shiraho sitting there with her knees drawn to her chest, it felt somewhat familiar—I remember back when Konoha first arrived, she also did the same thing. No actually, it was even worse... When I was still a little kid, I saw Pops pushing a teacup towards Konoha and ended up with tea splashed all over himself. That sight of him jumping from the scalding tea was truly terrifying..."

"Uwah—! Wah—! How do you still remember that? Please erase it from your memory!"

"Cow Tits has been exposed as a wolf in sheep's clothing? With that kind of past, you are disqualified from enjoying tea and therefore the right to eat rice crackers as well. I'll finish up your share for you."

"This lack of tension, I'm not even sure if it's a good or bad thing... Is this always the atmosphere in this home?"

Her wound completely healed, leaving only a worrying (mostly due to Haruaki) hole in her uniform, Kirika shrugged slightly. Then she swept her gaze towards Shiraho.

"We now understand Sovereignty's curse and how you two met. Then could you tell us what happened next?"

The noisy conversations ceased and everyone sat up properly, gazing at Shiraho unerringly.

"...There are certain things I'm sure Sovereignty would be more informed."

Turning her face to the side, Shiraho resumed her murmuring explanations.

Part 4

The Sovereign Perfection Doll arrived at the back of a desolate shrine. Sitting down, the doll trembled constantly, shrinking into a ball.

"Ooh... Ah... Hoo...!"

Creak. The sound of the awakening Killing Organ, responsible for taking dozens of lives, could be heard.

The blade in the right hand had emerged completely while the left hand was about to erupt with another shiny blade. There was also an ominous sound of friction coming from around the thigh.

No! No! I must endure. Face rubbing against the floor, clutching the body, tears and saliva flowing, the doll suppressed itself amidst the creaking noises.

But this is so painful. So very painful. Painful enough to go mad.

How did it come to this—Sovereignty thought.

The answer was already clear.

This had happened the same way every time. Like a duty that had been performed for dozens of times already, it was also demanded by the curse. It was simply time for the doll to kill the owner that had fallen in love with it. The doll was always unwilling in the past, and this time, it was likewise unwilling. However, Sovereignty suffered unprecedented pain and felt unprecedented reluctance this time—

Ah yes... Indeed.

Because Sovereignty had also fallen in love with her.

—A dusk-colored curtain, she said.

"Curtain. You see, as the setting sun shines upon it... Hence it is dusk-colored.

Hoho, here is the curtain and this place is backstage. After the puppet show, the puppets gather here in secret to chat, a place where no one knows."

You are truly a poet—Sovereignty smiled. Shiraho kissed the doll with a light peck on the cheek.

To Sovereignty's recollection, he had actually taken female form at the time. Occasionally transformed into a girl on whim to converse, Sovereignty's gender became apparently irrelevant to Shiraho as time went on. Whether male or female, Sovereignty was still Sovereignty, that was what she had said.

Shiraho was very beautiful and even more adorable when smiling. Simply chatting to her about mundane things was a very enjoyable experience. She must be displaying what she had never shown to other "humans," sixteen years worth of gentleness, smiles, and all other emotions, offering them all to this doll—me. Her lifetime's worth of love naturally held substantial charm—

Hence Sovereignty had repaid her warmth with a light peck from gentle lips. At the same time, the curse could be felt.

Shiraho was acting in this manner by her own will. No doubt about it. But conversely, everything stemmed from the curse residing in this body. A curse that caused infatuation. Without the curse, would she still act the same way towards me—? There was no way to confirm this difficult question.

Sovereignty only felt that perhaps it was time to speak up. There was no choice but to speak.

"It's almost time."

"I see."

Through repeated communication, their feelings of love had accumulated and progressed. As their hearts and bodies touched time and again, the result was—«Embrace Only Once». The activation of the Killing Organ. Its time was arriving.

Much earlier than expected. Sovereignty had expected to endure for months or even years, but somehow the pace had quickened several weeks ago. Although it was only a premonition, Sovereignty knew.

"What do you mean by 'I see'...?"

"I mean that I don't mind—even if termination comes with your embrace."

Were these words sincere? Or was it 'an answer compelled by the curse'?

In spite of the ending, she was fine with it.

But Sovereignty was not.

Sovereignty did not want this result—

Hence, the doll did not resist at that time.

"Shiraho! Who were you talking to just now!? I knew it, it must be...!"

"...Don't come in here any time you want!"

They had believed the father to have gone out. The instant he entered the room, Sovereignty had forcefully returned to the form of a doll. But it was futile for the father seemed to have heard the doll's voice clearly.

"I said you wanted this doll with its shady past, so I gave it to you, but it looks like I was wrong...! Rather, buying this thing was a mistake all along! Give it to me!"

"S-Stop it!"

Grabbing the massive doll in his arms, he violently swept away Shiraho's hand that was holding it tightly. At the same time, the doll heard his painful coughing.

Although it could have taken human form to resist, the doll did not do so.

Because in that instant, the doll thought—Perhaps this might be a better ending.

If this led to destruction—then at least Shiraho would not be murdered.

(I'm s-sorry...)

Striking her head when being pushed away, Shiraho lay sprawled on the floor with a concussion. But her father did not pay attention and simply left with the doll.

Then Sovereignty was stuffed into a suitcase and taken somewhere.

Shiraho almost never left the house. As for the way her father was acting, clearly he would never tell her where the doll went. Stuffed in a cramped space, Sovereignty thought—So this is goodbye for us—Then several days passed.

However, during this period—

Part 5

Wondering if the doll had been handed over to the superintendent, Shiraho came to school—The story occurred similarly as the one told by Sovereignty masquerading as Shiraho during the school search two days previously.

"Because I had no intention of going to school, I had thrown out my uniform a long time ago. Left with no choice, I slipped secretly into school to seek that child, only to find a commotion there as soon as I arrived—Then I discovered the fainted student."

"That was the first time we ran into you, right? So you instantly knew the doll was the perpetrator?"

Fear asked. Shiraho answered as she continued to stare at the tatami:

"I had once heard Sovereignty mention that there was a method to impede the curse from acting on the owner."

"What method?"

After a breath's delay—

"By stealing the feelings of love from unrelated people."

"Ah! So... That's how... I see now...!"

Konoha suddenly looked up with realization. Resting her hand against her chest, she murmured as if she figured something out:

"But... Ah yes, I think that means 'accumulated feelings of love' rather than the 'will to love.' Hence the feelings towards the loved one still linger—except with a feeling as if a hole had been opened in my heart... If one were to explain this using the concept of love as a person's source of power, then it is similar in nature to the life force necessary for living. When accumulated feelings of love are drawn out and taken away, fainting as a side effect doesn't seem so surprising now—"

"Konoha? Don't just explain things to yourself over there. If possible, please tell us too."

Haruaki's request caused Konoha to wave her hands frantically.

"Eh... Uh—! Regarding my feelings of love, please allow me to exercise my right to silence. Right now, the important point is that other people's feelings of love has a neutralizing effect on the love between Sovereignty and Shiraho—the countdown of the curse, is that right?"

Casting a disinterested glance at Konoha, Shiraho once again turned her gaze back to the tatami.

"—Correct. Different from the original activation condition, after being cursed, Sovereignty gained the ability to measure the 'love value' between her and the owner and use that as the condition for activating the Killing Organ. In other words, she is constantly absorbing the feelings of love from the owner and measuring them. Since it is absorbed gradually over time, the owner's health is unaffected. Once accumulated beyond a certain threshold, it simply activates the mechanism."

"Eh? But doesn't that mean that if you absorb feelings of love from others, you are accelerating the curse's progress instead?"

"The amount measured refers to the 'feelings of love from the owner,' foolish human. Through absorbing feelings of love from others, it temporarily confuses the curse as to the 'identity of the owner.' That's what I heard."

"Ah, now I see."

Shiraho snorted in derision and continued to explain what had happened the day before yesterday.

Since Sovereignty was responsible for causing the student to faint, Shiraho deduced that she had already escaped and all they needed to do next was meet up. A person like her from outside the school would only raise alarms if discovered, hence Shiraho decided to leave first.

At this moment, Haruaki and the rest had shown up.

Chased into the dressmaking room, the situation had been worsened by Fear

asking "You must be the doll, right?" After all, only someone who knew about the situation, namely those working under the superintendent, could have asked such a question.

If these people were to find out that "Sakuramairi Shiraho herself" had appeared and that she was so strongly bonded to the doll that she came to retrieve it, they would naturally conclude that "the doll will return to Shiraho's side." In that case, even if Sovereignty returned, they might end up being separated again. Hence—

"I had no choice but to hide the fact that I am Sakuramairi Shiraho. Just as I desperately pondered how to escape—Sovereignty arrived."

"Pretending to be passing by and discovering the fainted student by chance—According to Class Rep's speculation, the uniform was obtained from the dressmaking preparation room?"

"Apparently so. Just as she happened to find the uniform and took on a female guise, she heard someone's voice about a fluttery dress, causing her to wonder if I had arrived to find her—That was what Sovereignty told me. Later on, she told me that she rushed out in order to find a way to rescue me."

Dressed in a uniform, she was struck with sudden inspiration—Shiraho said.

"If that child decided to start draining feelings of love from others, it was definitely done for the sake of staying together with me. Perhaps I was jumping to conclusions, but that was what I believed. In that case, I had to do everything I could to help her."

"So you went along with our mistake and switched identities. You pretended you were the doll..."

"Simultaneously fulfilling the dual goals of 'hiding the fact you are Sakuramairi Shiraho' and 'having the opportunity to continue absorbing feelings of love.' Now that I think about it, you really did pick a very efficient strategy. And now I understand why the stage had to be set in school—with the fake culprit attracting all the attention, the true culprit lurking in school was free to attack the unwary. Because you never attended school before, simply enrolled in name only, no one had ever seen what you looked like. That was what you took advantage of? But why did you admit yes so readily when asked if you were

"only draining life force in this school'?"

In response to Kirika's question, Shiraho turned her gaze towards Konoha.

"...Because the glasses-wearing girl spoke too confidently, indeed I did waver at one point on this account. But attempting to perform absorption outside the school had several drawbacks. First of all, there would be too many witnesses. Also, since the intense feelings of love during puberty are essential to have an effect, it is far too troublesome to look for students in desolate areas out in the streets. The fact that Sovereignty is only doing this in school would likely be discovered eventually even if I hadn't confirmed it—Furthermore, admitting to it would reinforce your impression that 'I' would invade the school every day to drain life force, and as a result, keep Sovereignty safe."

"You thought quite far ahead, it must not have been easy... Speaking of not easy, you even deliberately acted as if you were unable to move your body naturally, I'm amazed you managed it."

Fear spoke helplessly. Just as she pointed out, it was all Shiraho's act to make others think she was a doll. On their way back to the Yachi residence from Shiraho's home, Haruaki was shocked to find her walking so smoothly without any impediment.

"Pretending in front of you people is not different from an acting performance. It's very simple—even though I am not actually very athletic."

Getting over the school walls did take quite a bit of effort—She added with self-deprecation. She explained that it was by pure luck that Sovereignty happened to see her from a window. Haruaki was surprised to find out that Sovereignty had moved the bronze statue down below while looking out the window from the calligraphy classroom.

"Correct, because she once mentioned she could only move dolls within her line of sight. Although that child only spotted me by chance, she was apparently trying to help me escape from school safely by taking part in your operations."

Exhale... Her sigh was filled with an air of exasperation.

"...Fundamentally, she is a good child. Both naive and gentle, she does not have the calculating mind required to deceive you proactively. Hence she never

ambushed you from behind and in fear of being caught, she avoided lying as much as possible beyond the minimum required. That child only wished to save me and understand what kind of people you are—what a waste of opportunity. Had her personality been as nasty as mine, I'm sure she would have eliminated you people through forceful methods early on."

Seeing Shiraho's lips contorted in self-torment, Fear snorted dismissively:

"I already know she is a good fellow. I can at least tell she wasn't faking."

Sweeping her glance across Fear once, Shiraho continued.

Using a metaphor that only the two could understand between them, Sovereignty successfully reunited with Shiraho at her room. They then discussed how to proceed and decided to maintain their switched identities to steal feelings of love—Due to Sovereignty's gentle personality, instead of eliminating Haruaki's group, they only continued acting out the deception.

"Proceeding from there, our task was not difficult. If an incident occurred while the imposter, me, had proof of absence, perhaps you would be led to believe someone else was stealing people's feelings of love. Hence I had a message passed along to the human that was safe for me to appear before, in order to use him as my witness."

The unknown boy who passed the message to Haruaki's classmate was Sovereignty in male form. The uniform required to dress as a boy had been acquired beforehand—Haruaki recalled the homeroom notices when the teacher reminded people to beware of theft inside the school.

"To prevent anyone from interfering with the sports ground meeting, Sovereignty was responsible for keeping watch. During that time, he spotted you."

The target of Shiraho's slanted gaze, naturally, was Konoha.

"If you were to arrive on scene, I might be captured so Sovereignty had no choice but to stop you—Afterwards, the child was convinced you saw your attacker. Because of that, she did not go to school today, deciding to stay home to plan our next move... But the result ended in what you witnessed just now. Even by absorbing other people's feelings of love to impede the curse, she was

approaching her limit."

"I see now. But in actual fact, all I saw was a guy's legs..."

Konoha murmured softly. The whole room seemed to suddenly descend into silence.

After a while, Fear stood up. Walking over to Shiraho who was still sitting with her knees against her chest, Fear asked with a stern expression:

"I have something to ask you."

"...About what?"

Everything that could be explained had been said already—Shiraho looked up at Fear, conveying her thoughts with a wary expression.

"If you had already heard from her what we talked about, then you should understand that we were not trying to destroy her but to help her lift her curse. Why doesn't she want to lift her curse? Why didn't you ask her to lift her curse? She doesn't want to kill you, and neither do you want to be killed by her, right? I can't think of a single reason why the curse shouldn't be lifted. Once you transfer ownership to Haruaki, the curse will no longer have any effect, hence the curse that had been tormenting you both will disappear. Rather than stealing other people's feelings of love and experimenting with uncertain methods to extend your time, wouldn't it be better to wait for the curse to lift, gradually—"

"You said to lift the curse?"

Shiraho's gaze turned sharp. Precisely because her facial features were so fine and exquisite, she was able to express emotions more directly than anyone. Then she spoke angrily:

"...Is that so? Apparently, you are even more inferior as a tool than Sovereignty."

"W-What did you say!?"

Fear retorted, outraged. Shiraho glared in return as she forced her voice out of her throat:

"From the standpoint of Sovereignty and me—There is no distinction

between curse and love! It is simply the bond that exists between us. If the curse were to be lifted or if I were to be Sovereignty's owner no longer, perhaps all that would vanish without a trace. I don't want that! You want me to treat it as just a passing dream? To relegate everything to a curse? Supposing these feelings are all due to the curse... Do you think I can simply abandon them with a simple 'Oh yeah, that's right!' Because—"

"Because, indeed, you are human."

Patting the silver-haired head lightly, Haruaki chimed in. Fear stared at him in puzzlement.

"I finally feel like I can relate to you and Sovereignty's feelings... Fear, it's like this. Human feelings cannot be explained completely with logic. And amongst various inexplicable emotions, the most representative feeling is love."

"...Really? It's so difficult to understand."

"No~ In actual fact, I don't understand either. But I simply feel it—so I can relate to Shiraho's feelings. You shouldn't be so hard on her."

Fear looked up, gazing directly into Haruaki's eyes.

Then she turned her gaze towards Shiraho, bowing her head and said:

"Since that doll 'is acting even more human' than me—perhaps I am indeed an inferior class of tool. I have so many things I don't understand. But I do want to understand them. So... If I said anything that was insensitive to your feelings, I apologize. I'm sorry."

Fear bowed. No one could have expected her to apologize humbly. Shiraho displayed slight shock but as if trying to act unfazed, she immediately resumed her poker face and turned her head away. Perhaps feeling embarrassed, she went "Hmph," took the teacup by her feet and raised it to her lips.

"Oh! Are you feeling awkward from an honest apology? You have lost to the magic of tea's charm!"

"...Ah."

Shiraho stared at the teacup. Having drank from it already, there was not much she could do but simply glare momentarily at Haruaki as he smiled, then

she finished it.

"...Not tasty at all."

"That's because it cooled off already. Would you like some newly brewed tea? Just now, it felt like you were trying to say: 'You said it would be tasty and got my hopes up, but it ended up short of expectations, how disappointing.'"

"N-No thank you! Know your bounds, human!"

Thud! The empty teacup was placed on the tatami. Her cheeks seemed slightly reddened—Her true personality is more and more exposed! —Haruaki felt happy for some reason.

At this time, Shiraho suddenly looked up towards Fear.

"—Sovereignty, she..."

"Eh?"

"Sovereignty told me that Fear is a very good person and that she was really happy to be friends with her. But being forced to deceive you pained her deeply. Also—since you must be sad that the glasses-wearing one was harmed, she wished she could apologize to you."

Then Shiraho simply stopped and turned her gaze away, as if saying "Don't mistake this for any special meaning, that's simply what was said."

"I see... So that doll said something like that..."

Fear's grave expression brightened. Definitely, it was what Shiraho meant.**

"No, umm~ In my view, anything that happens to Cow Tits has nothing to do with me. In fact, I think she deserved it! Since she's already recovered, it's completely meaningless. I'm guessing her breasts are most likely filled with emergency nutrients? Hmph, to think she's secretly hoarding her stores for herself. She should share those breasts equally with the entire world!"

"Seriously, there are so many things wrong with what you said I don't even know where to begin!"

As Fear and Konoha began to quarrel, Shiraho watched the room without any personal involvement. As if trying to steer the conversation back on track, Kirika

spoke:

"Okay—Yachi, how do we proceed from here? Since Sovereignty's curse is already on the verge of its absolute limit, even if she could suppress it for now, it can't go on indefinitely. Her mind will be consumed with the thought of killing Shiraho. Although Shiraho could stay here for now, it doesn't resolve the fundamental issue. After all, since Wathes maintain connections to their owners to various extents, it is likely that Sovereignty will instinctively seek out her owner's location eventually."

Indeed, their current priorities lay in deciding their next move. Just as Kirika pointed out, they did not know how long they could continue harboring Shiraho at the Yachi residence. If this did not work, should Shiraho be sent to flee far away somewhere? No, in order to safeguard Shiraho's life, the most simple and certain solution was—

"Please do not kill her."

Shiraho pled.

Indeed, they had already promised her, so that solution was not open either.

In that case, it boiled down to severing the relationship between Shiraho and Sovereignty—Asking her to relinquish her rights of ownership was the only option left. But Shiraho was unwilling because she did not want to abandon their love.

Even if death was the price to pay, she was unwilling to change her stance.

(Then what on earth could be done...?)

An impasse. Every solution seemed to be ruled out.

Just when that seemed to be the situation—

"—I have a plan."

The silver girl spoke as she gazed into the distance.

For some unknown reason, Fear then led Shiraho out of the living room. Kirika and Konoha exchanged gazes in surprise. Then Shiraho immediately returned.

"Uh... What did you two talk about?"

"She only asked me about Sovereignty's Killing Organ. As well as whether it is possible to contact her."

"Is it possible?"

"I bought a pre-paid cellphone for her only yesterday. But since she fled to avoid killing me, she definitely won't pick up my calls. It's possible she might have thrown the phone away already."

Shiraho returned to her old spot, namely, the corner of the room. Fear arrived later than her and began gesturing from the porch.

"Kirika, Cow Tits, I've got something to tell you, come over here."

"What kind of plan is it...?"

"Well, fine..."**

"Eh? What about me?"

As for Haruaki, Fear expressionlessly told him:

"You'll be last."

"What is this...? It feels like I'm being left out. Quite uncomfortable."

"Just sit down for now."

The three girls left the living room, leaving Haruaki alone with Shiraho in awkward silence. Adjusting his seat cushion uncomfortably and sipping tea, Haruaki endured roughly ten minutes before the three finally returned. For some reason, Kirika and Konoha narrowed their eyes seriously.

"No other way... I guess this is the only plan."

"Yes... But—"

Konoha glanced at Haruaki to examine his face while displaying a guilty conscience.

"What is going on, you two? What's the great plan—"

"Haruaki, you come over."

Fear stood in the porch as she called out. Finally my turn—Haruaki thought as he walked towards a corner of the porch.

The sun was now setting. The yard, the corridor, everything were now illuminated by a dusk-colored hue.

"What on earth is the plan? Hurry and tell me."

"Hmm... After careful consideration, I am convinced that there is only one thing you need to know."

Naturally, like the rest of the background, the diminutive girl's head of hair appeared to be golden yellow instead of silver.

The golden luster swayed lightly as Fear turned to look back as she walked in front. Then—

"I cannot tell you anything—Except this one point."

"...What?"

Haruaki was unable to understand her. However, Fear's gaze showed that she was serious.

"It's better that you don't know. Or rather, you can't be allowed to know."

"W-What are you talking about? I don't get it. Tell me, okay? There must be something I can help with!"

"Yes. You're helping simply by 'having no clue.' There's more to it, but you don't have to know."

"I can't understand what you're saying! What on earth are you—?"

Haruaki had a feeling like he was abandoned. It felt as if he was being excluded from the developing situation. Why did it have to be like this? —He really wanted to help Shiraho and Sovereignty too.

Was he really being excluded? Because he was a powerless human?

Fear smiled. Her eyes filled with sorrow—As if she was forced to give up something:

"I am a tool of torture. There is only one thing I can do."

"—Hey, you... What are you thinking? Tell me, what the heck is this!?"

Haruaki grabbed Fear by her slender shoulders. Her golden hair shook as a result.

Nevertheless, her gaze did not waver. Staring at Haruaki from an extremely close distance, she simply said a single word—

"...Sorry."

She lightly clutched Haruaki's hands on her shoulders.

For some reason, Haruaki felt a sense of warmth from this gesture, as if she was relying on him.

Subsequently, Haruaki could not voice any further objections.

After a quick dinner, the whole group made their way towards the Sakuramairi home beneath the dark night. There was virtually no conversation during the meal and Shiraho did not eat anything.

"Konoha, how is your condition?"

"Oh, don't worry, I'm roughly around 70% recovered. I don't expect any major exertion later either, so there shouldn't be a problem."

Even while they were traveling, that was all that was said. The fact that Konoha was not planning on any major exertion gave Haruaki some reassurance for now.

The whole group stopped in the clearing behind the Sakuramairi residence. There was no one else present and the trees surrounding the location prevented witnesses.

"Then what? Why have we returned here? Isn't it about time you tell me what you people are planning?"

Shiraho did not even try to hide her displeasure. Currently, only Haruaki and her were still in the dark.

Prompted by her question, Fear's silver hair danced.

"Kirika, is it time?"

"Almost. Konoha-kun."

"Yes... Though I'm not too keen on this. Haruaki-kun, umm... Lend me your

hand."

As soon as Konoha gripped his hand, there was a popping sound and a momentary illusion as if her clothing exploded. In a blink of the eye, Haruaki's hand now held a Japanese sword. Sheathed in its black scabbard—the demon blade Muramasa.

"Didn't you say you didn't plan on any major exertion?"

"Well... It's a long story."

The sword spoke hesitantly. Haruaki was struck with a resigned feeling of "fine, do whatever you want." Seeing Konoha in sword form for the first time, Shiraho stared with her eyes wide.

"Okay, let's begin the explanations. Very soon, Sovereignty will be arriving here."

"Eh? Why?"

"While you were preparing dinner, I asked Kirika to call the cellphone to contact the doll. I had asked Shiraho for the number earlier."

"...She won't come. For the sake of not killing me—"

"She will. Because what I told her was: 'If you don't come, I will kill Shiraho.'"

"Wha—?"

"Apologies!"

The instant he heard Konoha's voice, Haruaki found his body moving against his will.

Twisting Shiraho's arm behind her, he pressed the sword's scabbard against her neck—

"K-Konoha! What are you doing? Stop!"

Haruaki's body was unable to move by his own will. Unable to resist. "Controlling the user's body" was the "ability" Konoha acquired after being cursed rather than the involuntary effect of her curse. Hence, even against Haruaki who was immune to curses, Konoha could still maintain control so long as she wished—

"Oh... Is that so? Ultimately, you ended up deciding that humans are inconsequential, tools. But very regrettably, even if Sovereignty came, it will simply strengthen her wish to kill me. She won't come."

Shiraho did not resist, or perhaps she understood that it was futile for an ordinary person to resist. All she did was display a derisive expression.

"She will definitely come. Even at the risk of being killed, so long as your life is being threatened, she will come... I understand that is the nature of the bond between you, isn't it?"

Fear's words were proven in mere minutes.

Making an appearance beneath the moonlit night—was the silhouette of the berserk doll.

"What are you people... Doing... To Shiraho...!"

Sovereignty's voice trembled. The doll's body was also trembling. Various parts all over its body were convulsing visibly. Soiled by drool, tears and dirt, its face displayed murderous intent brought by the curse, a sense of emptiness that transcended exhaustion, as well as pure rage—

"Exactly as what was said on the phone. We decided to destroy you to resolve the matter because it'd be too troublesome otherwise. This girl here was the bait for this purpose."

"—That's not what you promised! Didn't you say that you won't destroy Sovereignty!?"

Greatly alarmed, Shiraho began to struggle in earnest. But the human restraining her—in other words, Haruaki's body, completely refused to budge. Likewise, the Japanese sword against her throat remained immobile.

"Fear, what are... you doing? ...Konoha, hey, Konoha! Are you girls for real? Stop this joke now, I absolutely forbid it!"

Was this the case? Because there was no way to save both of them, they are making do with saving one person? For the sake of that one person, the other must be sacrificed? People's lives are not supposed to be ranked when saving

them! It's not like choosing between a tool and a human! This kind of thing... This kind of thing—Absolutely—!

"Yachi, I understand how you feel, but this is the only way. Sorry!"

Kirika stood in her uniform beside Fear, the «Tragic Black River» dangling from her sleeve.

"Even you, Class Rep!? Wait a minute, are you all really okay with this? Hold on! ..."

His words landed on deaf ears.

The doll took a step forward. Its body had sprouted many sharp blades. Right hand, left hand, shins, thighs, hips, shoulders, chest—popping out like folded knives, bearing dozens of centimeters of killing intent. These were all positioned on the front side of the body, to realize the embrace of termination.



It went without saying that Sovereignty's school uniform had been ripped open by these lustrous objects born from within. Beneath these clothes, no better than rags now, two asymmetric bulges were seen on the chest, mismatched in size for some reason.

"Destroy... me...?"

"You look quite broken already. I can see quite a few of these obscene looking things poking out. Are you going to grow more of them? Also, you can't even tell if you're male or female anymore, right? What an unsightly body you have there."

Fear sneered at Sovereignty's body. Forced to submit in a sitting position on the ground, Shiraho gnashed her teeth as though doing it in the moaning doll's stead.

"Guwuu... Ahhh, ah...!"

"Oh? You want to embrace Shiraho and the impulse to kill her is unbearable? I understand, I really do. She is very pretty, her beauty is otherworldly. Indeed, I'd like to kill her too."

"Huh...?"

"Hohoho... Ahahaha! Let me announce my name—I am the «Fear-in-Cube»!"

Fear took out the Rubik's cube and transformed it to emulate her true form. As the chain of cubes extended from her right hand, the steel cube dropped by her feet. The heavy and blunt sound effect added greatly to the dramatic entrance.

"I don't know if you've killed dozens or hundreds, but... Ha! You're still too inexperienced! I am the one who has slaughtered tens of thousands! Because I was created for the purpose of murder! The sadist capable of inflicting all forms of torture and execution! Your embrace is but child's play in my eyes. My embrace represents the scattering of human flesh, my rhythmic movements represent penetration, my peristalsis represents crushing and severing, my caress represents strangulation. Come seek my guidance, doll! I can show you ways dozens of times more effective in making people lose themselves in rapturous delight!"

"W-What is she talking about!? This girl, she—hasn't gone mad again, has she? Hey Konoha, now is not the time to be doing this! She must be stopped immediately! Give my body back to me—Konoha!"

The sword did not respond. Haruaki felt a chill down his spine as he thought— There was a reason for this show of force and explained this reluctant compromise and Fear's berserk appearance. Similar circumstances. Oh no, clearly she had endured past that! Clearly she should have overcome it! But why again—

"Konoha! Damn it, Fear, stop! Calm down!"

"Haha, how noisy on the side over there. So here is the conclusion... I will now destroy you, relishing in your destruction, then I will proceed to kill Shiraho who has outlived her usefulness! Because I am the killing tool and her beauty makes her worthy to be my victim! Whether princesses or housemaids, I have personally killed both in the past, but none of them can compare to her! Oh how I truly look forward to it, the sight of her face twisted in ugliness, tearfully screaming for mercy, dying with incontinence!"

Haruaki was rendered speechless. In contrast, the other side also turned into a tool, screaming with full force.

"Ahhh... Ahhhhhh... Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh! Never, I will never ever let you do that! I absolutely... will not... let you... kill... Shiraho! I won't... allow—!"

Sovereignty took a great leap. Twisting in pain like a snake—

New sharp blades sprouted from the upper arms. Then between the fingers, on the flanks, arms—silver-white luster rose up successively.

A series of grinding noises could be heard.

Crish crish crish crish crish crish crish crish crish crish.

The unending noises sounded almost rhythmic. Indeed, right now in this place, performing a symphony of sounds akin to screams was—

The Killing Organ.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh! I won't.. let you... Won't let... you... So... You will die ——"!

"Kirika! It's coming, don't die on me!"

"Very regrettably, dying is quite difficult for me. You should be careful yourself, Fear-kun!"

Consumed with rage, the doll charged forward.

In contrast to the rusty grinding sounds, the sharp blades accompanying the song displayed no hesitation at all.

Go on and desire! What do you desire? Anything is fine.

Because in Fear's heart, the ominous and terrifying existence was no longer—

"Mechanism No.19 gouging type, spiral form: «Human-Perforator», Curse Calling!"

The cube transformed into a spinning drill. Sovereignty was already closing in head on. There was no mistaking the doll's unskilled movements for nothing but the speed of a rampaging beast. With no sense of self remaining in Sovereignty's expression, one could not help but wonder if the doll actually put in any thought before acting.

Without using any pretermimed moves, Sovereignty simply swung the blades on the palms, arms and legs instinctively. Due to the haphazard nature of the attacks, Fear could not predict the blades' trajectories and could only manage by deflecting the attacks with the drill.

"Oh my, is this really okay? Compared to the the evilness of this drill, don't you find your blades completely outclassed? Why don't just give up obediently and let me drill you—Naturally, Shiraho is next after you."

"...! No... I absolutely won't allow..."

"Talk is cheap."

The doll's arm, postured as if executing a lariat, swung out along with the blades but was blocked by the drill. Immediately, the doll followed up with an attack from a knee equipped with a sharp popup blade. Fear retreated in response. Just as Sovereignty advanced in pursuit—

"Is this really okay, doll? To ignore me completely."

"Ooh—?"

A jet black belt entangled the doll's body. In order to avoid getting swept up in the fight, Kirika had kept her distance and was controlling the «Tragic Black River» from afar. Skillfully avoiding Sovereignty's blades, the belt tied up the doll's body like vines creeping over a tree. Seizing this chance while the doll's movements were stopped, Fear stepped forward, pulling back the drill in her hand—

"Sovereignty! Oh no... Stop this immediately, I beg you, please stop—!"

Shiraho screamed. Ignoring her, Fear thrust the drill forward.

However, after piercing the uniform, the drill bit halted only after embedding itself millimeters into the one-sided bosom.

"Hoho, killing in one move would be too uninteresting. So let me slowly open up holes in your body? Let's start with this breast, but seeing as it can change in size, it might be a bit pointless... Hmm, then I'll drill Shiraho's chest instead, it'll be more fun that way. Which do you prefer? Being drilled or watching others getting drilled? As for me, both are—"

"Ooh... Ah... Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Crish crish crish. The organ played new music. More blades appeared from the doll's body and severed Kirika's belt, allowing Sovereignty to struggle free.

"Kirika!"

"Tsk... Don't worry, this belt can continue to extend. However—this has become a bit tricky."

Watching Sovereignty's increase in blades, Kirika murmured softly with a solemn expression. The doll stared at Fear with a hollow gaze.

"If you dare do anything to Shiraho, I won't forgive you...!"

"Tsk—Mechanism No.22 bludgeoning type, spike-ball form: «Morgenstern», Curse Calling!"

The drill transformed into an iron club. Although its tip was shorter compared

to the drill's, the club looked equally menacing. Almost large enough to hide a small child was the sphere covered in spikes—namely, the morningstar.

Twisting her hips in the manner of the sport on television known as baseball, Fear swept the wrecking ball horizontally towards the doll. This occurred just as the doll was pouncing for an attack. Sovereignty blocked the spiked ball using the blades all over its body, but was blown away by the difference in weight.

Fear could hear Shiraho scream. Yes, that's right, scream and cry as much as you can!

Just as Fear was thinking that, a series of loud noises shook her eardrums. Looking in the direction where Sovereignty was sent flying, the trees that surrounded the clearing—several of them had fallen with astounding impact.

"I hold sovereignty over every doll—Those bearing visual semblance, listen and show proof of your worship. Obey. Obey. Obey!"

"...? Ah, I see, those puppet minions again!"

This was what Sovereignty had secretly done back in the dressmaking classroom back when she was taking Shiraho's identity. The manifestation of sovereignty granted by the curse. By chopping down trees here, Sovereignty forcibly created "tools resembling humans in form."

A trunk and two branches for arms, as well as lower limbs fashioned with a slice from Sovereignty's blades. Crudely designed in this manner, two wooden puppets began moving with the sound of unnatural joints.

"Tsk—"

Apparently tasked with the elimination of interlopers, their target was Kirika. While she was occupied with tying down one tree with her belt, the other one approached her. By the time she turned to evade as she realized in alarm, it was too late. The puppet closed in and pierced her shoulder with its sharp hand. As vivid red droplets fell, Kirika bit her lower lip and distanced herself.

"Class Rep...! Konoha, go over and help her, come on!"

Fear could hear Haruaki's anxious voice. Yes, you should act this way too. Just act this way.

In any case, Kirika's belt was unsuited to handling these kinds of opponents. Fear had to do something.

"Take this—!"

Fear once again swung the morningstar to smash away Sovereignty who still had not learned its lesson regarding weight. Rushing forward to support Kirika, Fear smashed the wood using the iron ball, easily wrecking the two trees that were attacking Kirika.

"Sigh~ Too easy! Too easy! Sovereignty Perfection Doll, did you really think that these puppets could help you? Do you still believe that after witnessing the power of this black iron? So ludicrous I can't even laugh out loud. Although only the strong can wield this «Morgenstern», it can be considered the amazing progenitor of sadism. With but a swing, human flesh flies and scatters with a 'smack!' I just love swinging it at the faces of beautiful women. Indeed, for a beauty like Shiraho, her face will instantly be twisted into ugliness, trite tears shall fall, spikes will bury into her snow-white skin—Smack! Ahahahahahahaha!"

"...Fear...?"

She found Haruaki furrowing his brow slightly.

Yeah—It's almost time for him to realize. But please, just a little while longer.

This was still not enough.

"Ooooooh, ooooooooooh, ooooooooooh buwooooooyaaaaaaa!"

Faced with Sovereignty's incoming attack, Fear deliberately swung the iron ball with less force.

Letting the iron ball come to a rest on the blades of the doll's body, Fear gazed gently at the sight as she thought to herself—

Are you holding onto that thing because of a death wish? Who knows, in the next instant, it might not be an iron ball anymore!

"Mechanism No.18 stretching type, framing form: «The Duke of Exeter's Daughter» , Curse Calling!"

The wrecking ball transformed into a stable pedestal with a rectangular frame

upright above it. Despite the lack of intimidating qualities like blades or spikes, it was still without a doubt a torture tool for inflicting pain.

On the top and bottom edges of the frame were what appeared to be crossbeams. Extending from the left and right ends of these beams were simply ordinary chains unlike the chain of cubes. Rattling noisily as they moved, the chains restrained Sovereignty's four limbs using the iron rings on their ends.

Then—the beams moved within the frame. The top beam was raised while the bottom one was lowered. Naturally, bound by the chains, Sovereignty's body was stretched vertically as a result.

"Ah... Ooh, gah..."

"How does the rack feel? Sovereignty Perfection Doll. On further thought, even though you're named the doll of perfection, I find your height a little too short. Let me help stretch you taller with this device—Until your arms and legs and pulled off! Ahahaha!"

Bound within the frame, suspended in midair, Sovereignty was immobilized. Moaning like a wild beast, all the doll could do was shake its body pointlessly.

The chains rattled noisily. The numerous extended sharp blades reflected the light from the starlit night. From gaps in the torn uniform, one could watch large droplets of sweat gliding down as if slowly licking the skin. Tied to the rack was Hermaphroditus^[7]—the doll who emulated him. Fear examined him seriously.

(Is now the right time?)

She had to be prudent and not misjudge the timing.

"Sovereignty... Ahhh, stop it, hurry and stop this!"

Fear confirmed the source of the voice. All in tears, Shiraho was acting more human than she had ever been.

"I beg you...! Kill me, kill me instead! I've had enough of this—so please don't kill Sovereignty! Please, I beg you... I beg you—!"

Shiraho struggled and twisted her body violently. Standing over her, Haruaki watched with an expression of mixed feelings. It went without saying, the

Japanese controlling his body would not allow her to escape.

Fear slowly walked up to Sovereignty as the doll remained suspended on the rack.

"What, is this it? Is this really all you've got? Oh look, see how Shiraho is crying? How should I put this? It really arouses my desire."

"Gwuuuuu... Ahhhh... Guaaaaaaaaaah!"

Crish crish.

More came out—additional parts of the Killing Organ poked out of the doll's body. By this point, Sovereignty's appearance resembled a mountain of swords.

Sovereignty swiveled its wrists that were restrained by the iron rings, producing an unpleasant bone-scraping sound. The blades protruding from the palms made contact with the iron rings repeatedly as a result of the forceful rotations. Finally, the rings yielded to the impacts of the sharp blades. As the wrists struggled free from the iron rings, the doll recovered freedom in its upper body. Then swinging the blades wildly at the foot restraints, Sovereignty released the shackles.

"Oh wow..."

Fear exclaimed in admiration as she returned the rack to cube form and withdrew it back to her hand.

Collapsed on its knees, Sovereignty immediately stood up.

"Huff... Ooooooooooh..."

Its breathing irregular, its eyes displayed turbidity, its limbs convulsing.

It felt like Sovereignty was reaching its limits.

Then it was about time to reach a conclusion.

For this purpose, it was necessary to capture the doll like just now. Although Sovereignty had wholly lost all sense of self, the previous move should have raised its wariness. A simple trap like the one previous probably would not work again.

...No problem.

In that case, preparing a more complicated trap will do.

Preparations for that were already in place.

"Hoho, you're really trying hard. So how about I give you a chance?"

The cube on the end of the chain transformed back into the Rubik's cube. Grabbing it—Fear then tossed it far far away, over Sovereignty's head, all the way in the distance behind the doll. The piece of plastic landed on the ground with a thud.

Fear stretched out her empty hands—

"Okay, I am completely unarmed now! Come at me with everything you've got! Because you're too weak, I am taking pity on you. Don't worry, I can't possibly die from that half-baked embrace of yours. To me, your embrace is pretty much the same as an iron maiden's, amounting to a mere thirty-second of my being! Even if you can prepare thirty-two times more blades than now, I don't think you can still defeat me! Okay, let's go!"

Who knew if Sovereignty actually heard.

In any case, the doll approached after roaring like a wild beast.

What exactly is going through Sovereignty's mind? Fear suddenly wondered.

Compelled by the curse to kill Shiraho, was Sovereignty consumed with eliminating me who is obstructing the murderous act? Or perhaps, for the sake of protecting its loved one, Sovereignty could not forgive me for wanting to harm Shiraho—

(Am I feeling jealous...)

Sovereignty was mere meters away. With just a few more steps, Fear would enter the Killing Organ's range.

And then the act of «Embrace Only Once» would be realized—the end of a love story between a doll and a human.

However.

(The one you wish to embrace shouldn't be me, right?)

Fear bent down and reached out with both hands as if in anticipation—

"Kirika, I'm entrusting my other self to you!"

"Already done!"

As indicated by their exchange—The Rubik's cube, which had been tossed far away, was thrown back after Kirika's «Tragic Black River» retrieved it. They had prepared this plan beforehand for this moment. It needed to be said that this method was completely cliched, but against an almost unconscious doll, it was more than sufficient.

The thrown toy was released from the belt and flew almost touching the ground. Catching with one hand the toy as it flew between the doll's legs, Fear swiftly activated the emulation cube with only an instant to spare. Using her foot to push the cube forward beneath Sovereignty's crotch, Fear performed a backflip using the momentum—for Sovereignty was almost close enough to be breathing down her back—and evaded the blades in this manner. Before the doll could take another step—

"Mechanism No.9 capturing type, spinning form: «Inquisitional Wheel», Curse Calling!"

The cube transformed into a massive wheel, capturing Sovereignty who was positioned just above it.

This wheel was even bigger than the «Breaking Wheel of Francia» and resembled a waterwheel in appearance. Stored in various parts of the wheel were hand and foot shackles. This was a device for making the victim one with the edge of the wheel, completely depriving the victim of all freedom. Once captured, none could escape. Beatings, trials by water or by fire, or simply draining stamina by turning the wheel, myriad possibilities could be inflicted upon the immobilized victim.

However, what needed to be done now was different from all harsh punishments in the past—

"Stop it... Stop it... Stop it! I beg you to stop, please, I am willing to do anything, everything..."

Shiraho's voice had become no different from the screams of nightmares.

Sovereignty reacted the same way as previously when captured by the rack...

No, the doll struggled even more intensely. Drooling, twisting that slender waist violently, the doll tried harder to arch its back forward. The blades on the snow-white thighs rattled as they knocked against one another.

"Oooh... Ooooooh...!"

"What now? Sovereignty Perfection Doll! Is this everything you've got? Is this really the very end? Is this really okay? You do know if this continues I am going to kill Shiraho, right! I will kill your most beloved woman! If you don't give it all you've got right now, Shiraho is a lost cause! And you won't be able to kill her! Shiraho will die a worthless death! Don't you hate this? You don't want this, right? Of course not!"

"No... No... NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!"

Sovereignty once again swiveled its wrists by force. But this time, the shackles were not mobile like those of the rack and were therefore most secure, able to last longer. On the other hand, one would worry that the doll's arms might break first.

Crish crish. Crish crish.

The noise continued. Most likely, it was the final—

"Then don't you be stingy! Awaken all curses in your body right now! Summon all the possibilities existing in your body for killing a certain someone! Brandish all the sharp blades hidden in your body! If you adore Shiraho and truly love her, if that is said to be the curse—then show everything to me!"

The instant these words reached the doll's ears—

Sovereignty's body struggled even more fiercely. Like a ferocious beast, or rather, one in its final death throes.

Clang—out from the position of the doll's heart, a sharp blade extended.

The Killing Organ's melody stopped.

"Is this the end?"

"Ah... Shira..."

"Is this truly the end!?"

"Oh no... Shira... ho... I'm sor..."

Seeing something shining in the corner of the eye, Fear decided it was time for the finale.

Namely—

"—Well then, my job is done here!"

Saying that, she turned around.

Then turning towards the overly well-intentioned man who always believed in and watched over her—She smiled and said:

"I'll leave the conclusion to you, Haruaki. You should already know what you have to do, right?"

Of course I know. The only one who didn't—

"...Eh?"

—Was probably Shiraho who could only emit sounds of shock.

There was no longer any need to restrain her. Probably realizing that Haruaki had figured out the situation, Konoha had already relaxed her control over his body. Their wills united as one, Haruaki sprinted at full speed towards the inquisitional wheel.

Sovereignty was still struggling, trying to get free.

All the blades hidden in the doll's body were out in full force.

The issue was simple. The method to prevent Shiraho from getting killed without destroying Sovereignty—

The only remaining option was "depriving Sovereignty of the means to kill Shiraho."

Hence, there was only one thing to be done. Since Sovereignty was already restrained, there was no need to focus too much concentration. It was as simple as cutting grass.

Gripping the black scabbard with his left hand, Haruaki slid his right hand out

in the same motion.

To unsheathe the sword.

"—Sword-Kill Counter!"

A sharp gleam flashed across Sovereignty's body.

With precision fine enough to shave off hairs from the body, the numerous blades were sliced off at skin level.

With that, using Konoha's sword strikes that only destroyed weapons, Sovereignty's Killing Organ was—

Eliminated at the root without a single remnant.

Part 6

Having regained her freedom, Sovereignty took stumbling steps like a puppet as she approached Shiraho. Shiraho remained sitting on the ground, her face covered in tears.

"So... vereignty...?"

She did not reply but simply knelt before Shiraho, her expression hidden by her hair. Sovereignty embraced Shiraho's head.

"—I thought... I would never have a chance like this again."

"Yes... That's right."

"I really wanted to hold you tight. Although one might call it a curse, it is truly how I feel and I wanted to embrace you tightly in my arms. But then the Killing Organ started to sprout out—Escaping from the room back then, I was thinking: Oh no, I won't be able to embrace Shiraho again. That was when sorrow began to fill me."

"Yes... I see."

"But now, even if we embrace, you won't be killed anymore. So you are still alive, Shiraho."

"Yes, I am still alive. And so are you."

Shiraho wrapped her arms tightly around Sovereignty in turn.

Haruaki watched this scene from a distance with a petite figure standing by his side.

The unfolding scene was making him a little embarrassed, so he knocked the head beside him with his fist.

"Hey you, why are you hitting me!? I'll curse you!?"

"You... Yeah seriously! I've got so many complaints against you, I don't even

know where to start! So I'll just encapsulate everything with that fist just now."

"...Are you referring to our decision not to explain the plan to you? It couldn't be helped. The doll cannot control the Killing Organ voluntarily—that was what Shiraho said. Hence, we had to push Sovereignty to the limit and force her to expose her fully armed state. This was done by keeping Shiraho in his view and making the doll lose control to anger so that the curse's impulse is drawn out."

For this purpose, it was necessary to deceive Sovereignty into thinking Shiraho was in a desperate crisis, even severe enough to make her cry. Naturally, Shiraho could not be let in on the plan as a result. Furthermore, anything that could alert Shiraho to Fear's true intentions had to be prevented—such as a certain excessively kind-hearted person failing to express anxiety or attempt to restrain Fear's violence, or simply foiling the plan because of poor acting skills. Consequently, it was imperative to keep things secret from that particular kind-hearted person.

"Before I figured things out, I was really breaking out in cold sweat. I thought you had... Umm, returned to the way you were again..."

"But you believed in me, which was how you figured it out, right?"

She smiled gently as she replied. For some reason, Haruaki felt a little contemptible.

"However... Partially it was because I felt that you were provoking Sovereignty in an over the top manner. Seriously, why did you have to deliberately make yourself the villain?"

"I am a cursed torture tool, long accustomed to being hated by others."

Fear gazed into the distance as she spoke, so Haruaki knocked her another one on the head. This time, it was only a light tap.

Fear did not complain.

Head bowed down as she examined her body, Kirika approached and said:

"This uniform is a writeoff. What an unexpected expense. Though that said, it's a lot better than last time."

"Last time? Right, last time it was your casual clothes that were ruined... By

the way, is your injury okay?"

"It's healed already. That aside, are you okay, Konoha-kun? You've been silent from a while back."

"U-Urghhh... Eh? Ah, excuse me! I'm a little nauseous from accidentally catching a glimpse of your blood, Ueno-san, so right now... B-But I'm already fine!"

After that, Kirika and Konoha apologized to Haruaki independently even though he no longer minded. After he told the two girls that, they both displayed relieved expressions.

Seeing Shiraho and Sovereignty still embraced together, Haruaki asked for Konoha's opinion: "So umm, I'm simply curious. What do you think will happen to them from here on?"

"Well... The curse of 'falling in love together with the owner, then activating the Killing Organ and embracing the owner unto death' still remains, except that the Killing Organ is no more. So, uh—"

"'Embracing each other in love'—I guess that's basically the case. Indeed, the urge continues to linger in my body, except that 'wanting to kill' has been replaced by 'wanting to hug.'"

Sovereignty looked up and spoke. Was it because her desire had been fulfilled? Her expression seemed quite refreshed.

"Currently things have calmed by the curse's desire will probably revive. Because the owner remains the same..."

"Just have a hug every time you feel the urge, doesn't that work? No problem."

Shiraho was the one who pointed out the truth instead. Simply stated, Sovereignty was now akin to being afflicted with the "Hug Shiraho Poison."

"However—There are still some things I don't understand. Right now things are fine because the Killing Organ is gone, but as time passes, perhaps the nature of the curse might change. If it changes to a compulsion to kill Shiraho using methods apart from the Killing Organ, then..."

Indeed, Sovereignty's worry was inevitable. No one knew what could happen in the future.

Too obscure to predict.

Too complicated to understand.

Too strange for relief.

This was the future binding them—the shakles called a curse.

Nevertheless.

The words to break these shackles were so clear, innocent and high-minded.

"—Don't make me laugh."

Shiraho glared severely at the lover whose reunion came after such tribulation.

Although her lover's body was injured all over, the harmful sharpness remained no longer.

No curse was impossible to lift.

Looking only at the lover devoid of sharp blades, Shiraho continued to declare clearly: "You are just an ordinary doll now and hence only an ordinary human. I am not going to be killed by someone like you. When the time comes, I will wake you up with a punch."

While delivering this speech, the emotions expressed in Shiraho's face no longer resembled those of a doll's. Consequently, Shiraho was also an ordinary human. Weak, strong, fragile, sincere, full of contradictions—But precisely because of that, Haruaki and the rest were relieved to watch from afar this human expression. Naturally, Sovereignty was greatly surprised to witness Shiraho's behavior up close.

But it was probably not limited to surprise.

These two, whose positions were originally diametrically opposed, now stood on equal ground without precedent.

Shiraho reprimanded him with all her strength: Don't say anything discouraging.

It must have been exceptionally uplifting.

Consequently, the human-doll gazed into the determined eyes of the doll-human.

"I see... I'm not alone."

Sovereignty smiled as if bidding farewell to gloom.

Then came personal time for the two of them. After a while, Shiraho pressed her face against Sovereignty's—in other words, to avoid letting Haruaki and the rest see her expression as she whispered: "...So, about that thing you once mentioned, I don't think we need it anymore?"

Simply from those words, Sovereignty understood what she meant. After displaying a surprised expression momentarily— "That's... right. But are you okay with this, Shiraho?"

"Like I said, I don't need that thing. I don't know the details but you should return it... Just like I said just now, I won't let you kill me. So things are fine even without that thing."

Shiraho displayed a subtly angry expression. Seeing that, her lover also relaxed her expression and said: "Well then let's do it. Hmm, I also have a reason to return it in person."

Then Sovereignty turned towards Haruaki and the rest of the group who had no idea what they were talking about.

"I have a request, could you come over?"

"If I can help in any way, please tell me."

"Yeah, but rather than asking you... More correctly, I'd like to ask Katana-san over there."

"Me? What's the matter?"

Letting go of Shiraho gently, Sovereignty pointed to a certain location on her chest. Beneath her tattered clothing, snow-white skin was exposed. As Haruaki shifted his gaze away guiltily, Fear, Kirika and Shiraho all narrowed their eyes at the sight.

"Underneath this spot is an object that resembles a card. A few decades ago when I was still in Europe, a strange man decided on his own to insert it into my body."

"A card?"

Haruaki recalled the cursed axe wielded by the person from the organization that targeted Fear—The Frontline Gathering Knights Dominion. A disk had been found inside that axe.

"Could this also be... An Indulgence Disk? Does it look flat and smooth like this with corners?"

Fear frantically gestured with her fingers to draw a rectangle.

"Yeah, just like that. Black and slim."

"What is going on? Weren't the Disks all taken by those people from the Knights Dominion, Kirika?"

Kirika could only shrug in response.

"I've only heard rumors so I don't know any other details... But even if possession had fallen to other parties, it would not be surprising. The important thing is, in regards to that disk, what do you know? Did that man tell you anything about it?"

"Uh—the man who inserted the card didn't tell me this. But what I know is—it belonged to Fear originally and that it is able to suppress curses to some extent."

Sovereignty looked up and glanced at Fear.

"Recently, the curse-suppressing effect weakened—I'm guessing it probably started after Fear began to be active."

"What did you say...?"

"Ah, no, I don't really know how it works, I'm just guessing here. It's not your fault I became like this, Fear. That's not what I wish to think, which is why I'm telling you now."

Sovereignty shook her head and smiled:

"Any time in the future, if I ever go berserk like earlier and cause any irreparable harm—I would surely try to find an excuse to escape responsibility, like 'A certain someone caused the curse-suppressing effect to weaken.' I don't want to make that kind of excuse to my friends. Besides, since the effect had already weakened, keeping it is meaningless. So that is why I want to return it to Fear."

"You sure? After all, it's true that it does reduce your curse to some extent, right?"

Fear's question was only reasonable. Consequently, Sovereignty turned to look at Shiraho who had made the suggestion. Was it really okay? If the curse could no longer be suppressed, the victim would be Shiraho herself.

However she had already made her decision. Determined not to be killed no matter what happened. Accepting her resolve, Sovereignty's answer was naturally— "This kind of thing did not belong to me in the first place. Besides—"

Stroking Shiraho's head gently, Sovereignty continued:

"Thinking further on the nature of my curse, it feels like that disk has been an obstacle between us all this time. Although what lies await for us in the future is unknown, I neither want to deceive myself and others nor do I want to shift blame to anyone else. We will work hard together the two of us. This is the way for an ideal romance, right?"

Shiraho half-closed her eyes and murmured softly, a little happy:

"Yes—this kind of romance sounds like a curse."

Because Konoha said she wished to avoid seeing blood, Sovereignty temporarily returned to her doll form. Even so, she did not look too different from a real human. Konoha made a small incision on her chest while Fear inserted her fingers to extract the Indulgence Disk. Although the reason was unknown, this sort of wound did not reflect upon the human form apparently.

This followed by a brief period of peace and quiet.

Konoha rushed into the nearby thicket, making rustling noises as she changed

her clothes. Haruaki had wondered if he should assist her, but then again it would not be right for a man to be helping by handing over underwear.

"Anyway, back to the topic, I never expected to find this kind of thing in such a surprising place... Isn't it too much of a coincidence?"

Recalling the disk handed to Fear, Haruaki muttered. Hearing his comment, Kirika informed him with a disturbed expression: "...Perhaps it's not entirely by chance. Yachi, do you remember what I told you before?"

"Eh? About what?"

"Although it's just a rumor—Indulgence Disks apparently attract one another. Remember I told you when we captured that woman from the Knight's Dominion?"

"Now that you mention it... I recall something like that."

"Of course, the reasons and principles behind it are unclear. Also, there is the implication of intensity in the description of 'mutual attraction.' Is it a physical attractive force like magnets, or perhaps—attracting one another in fate? If so... Hmm, what's the matter?"

Haruaki recalled. On the first day of the unconscious incidents, Fear had rushed out of the superintendent's office and ran around the school building without any apparent goal—What was it that she said?

Intuition. My subconscious told me this is the direction. I feel like the culprit's presence is summoning me. There's this uneasy feeling flowing from within... Could it be possible that the Indulgence Disk's characteristics were the cause?

"It's possible, but it's not very distinct, right? I'm sure Fear-kun would find it quite strange if she feels like she's being pulled by forces as she runs around all day. Besides, she would have figured out Shiraho and Sovereignty swapped identities even earlier if that was the case. I suppose she simply feels like something is attracting her sometimes, maybe...? Perhaps that kind of property should be categorized as attraction in causality...?"

"Teacher, I think you're not being clear enough so I can't understand. Simply stated, what is it?"

Haruaki raised both arms to surrender. Originally murmuring to herself, Kirika answered simply: "I don't know either. Based on the property of mutual attraction, various chance events occurred throughout this incident—scattered across the world, one of these Indulgence Disks happened to be present inside Sovereignty by chance, who happened to be purchased and brought to Japan by Shiraho's father by chance, then coincidentally entrusted to the superindendent who is connected to the Yachi family, and now the Disk is returned to Fear by chance—Perhaps the attraction is the reason for all these coincidences. But I'm simply speculating on the spot."

"Hmm—But if we blame everything on the Indulgence Disk, I think we're over thinking things..."

"Of course. This is purely speculation to examine its plausibility, don't take it too seriously."

Hearing her say that, Haruaki decided not give the matter any further thought. After all, he was currently so exhausted he could not think straight.

A voice came from the thicket: "Ah no... Eh? M-My bra is missing...! Am I in big trouble?" Kirika shrugged and said: "I'll go help Konoha-kun for a bit." Then she made her way over. Along the way, she picked up the piece of underwear that had fallen nearby. The instant she witnessed its size, Kirika swayed unsteadily as if from dizziness, but Haruaki pretended not to see.

As for the others—Haruaki turned to survey the surroundings. Sovereignty had returned to human form and was side by side with Shiraho, discussing their future plans. On the other hand, Fear was slightly further away, holding the Indulgence Disk in one hand as she stared blankly at those two together. Haruaki felt concerned.

"What are you doing?"

"Hmm... What should I say, seeing those two—"

At a loss for words, Fear then placed her hand gently on her chest.

"How should I put it? ...There's an indescribable feeling in my heart. Like happiness but also like embarrassment... And a little like jealousy. What is going on?"

"...You are beginning to understand things you never comprehended before."

Haruaki deliberately gave an ambiguous answer, but Fear did not ask any further. Perhaps to a certain extent, she had already realized.

Really—Fear murmured softly as she gave Haruaki a glance.

"Changing the subject, once we get home... Umm, I'll be relying on you."

"On what?"

"O-Of course I mean this!"

Fear waved the card in her hand.

"To be frank, it hurt a bit last time. You shoved it in so violently... You must be gentle this time!"

"Because it's a tight fit for you... I'll try, but I can't guarantee anything."

"G-Give me a guarantee! That kind of thing is so embarrassing, of course a guarantee is required! Every time I scream in pain, I'll demand one rice cracker from you!"

"Are you trying to con me out of rice crackers by screaming in pain as much as you can? What a criminal idea, I can't agree to that!"

Feeling a belt tightening around his neck, Haruaki turned his head in trepidation— Only to find an expressionless demon.

"What's that about something embarrassing being tight and painful...? Yachi, tell me all about it."

"Class Rep! W-Wait a minute, you'll understand as soon as you listen to me!"

"Oh? You're willing to tell me? Although I was thinking it would be fine even if you insisted on silence—Provided you are very confident in the sturdiness of your neck! Hohohohoho!"

"Laughing in this expressionless manner makes you really scary!"

"Uh... Although I understand what is going on, I'm not going to stop them."

Behind them, Konoha was smiling politely with a complicated expression.

Shiraho and Sovereignty looked at each other in surprise.

Epilogue

Part 1

In terms of conclusion, Sovereignty decided to continue living in Shiraho's home.

Since they were unconvinced that lifting the curse was necessary, Haruaki did not insist. After all, with the Killing Organ gone and no need to drain feelings of love anymore, there was virtually no possibility of harming others—So they were left alone.

After reporting the series of occurrences to Zenon to pass onto the superintendent, several days had passed. As a side note, the monumental task of the Indulgence Disk's insertion was carried out during this time, with Fear and Haruaki blushing while Konoha pouted. Consequently, Fear lost access to the transformation of the «Inquisitional Wheel» mechanism.

During the lunch break on the day the superintendent returned...

Haruaki and his entourage went to the superintendent's office. The group included Haruaki, Fear, Konoha and Shiraho in uniform. Since Kirika's assistance had to be kept secret, she was not present.

"Seriously, how did things come to this?"

Her always beautiful face in a frown, Shiraho grumbled on the sofa. Glared by her for some reason, Haruaki hastily shook his head repeatedly:

"I-It's not my fault! I simply wanted to report to the superintendent!"

"...I get it. I just felt like complaining."

Unexpectedly, Shiraho avoided eye contact so easily. Although she kept a stiff expression as usual and gave off an unapproachable impression—From the fact that she could have an honest dialogue with him, Haruaki felt that her human-hating aura seemed to have weakened towards him slightly.

"Even if I resented you, it would not help matters at all. Ultimately, that man decides everything, right?"

"Because this is my job. As the highest authority in this school, I must settle this incident that resulted in quite a number of students fainting. I've already heard what happened but I will not compromise over this one point—As contrition, you must come to school and attend class seriously. That is my decision."

Swiveling his chair around, the man in the gas mask—the superintendent—spoke cheerfully. Switching the target of her glare to him, Shiraho spoke with her usual foul temper:

"Based on the current situation, you are the human I hate the most in this world, deviant!"

"Oh how it breaks my heart to hear that from my late friend's daughter. Sigh, but being scolded angrily by a beautiful woman is perhaps a rare and happy experience for certain people of peculiar tastes. Should I feel thankful instead?"

"..."

"...Just kidding, I'm not into that kind of fetish."

Watching the man in the gas mask speak, Haruaki slumped his shoulders in exasperation.

"Given your unusual appearance, if you say something like that as the superintendent, it's really not funny at all... Seriously, are we done? We've been skipping classes for days in a row, so we don't want to be late for fifth period."

"Hmm, wasting time is no good so let me explain first. Regarding what you are about to witness, let me give two reasons. One, the lack of manpower. When there's only one person present, if any special situation arises, the measures available to take in response are limited. Because of this incident, I received quite a scolding from Zenon-kun. As a result... I have created a new position

similar to a secretary's assistant."

"I've heard about this already. Didn't you call us here to witness how the new employee works?"

"Indeed. As for the second reason, well—Zenon-kun's hobby."

"Hobby?"

The superintendent's words left everyone scratching their heads in puzzlement. The superintendent lowered his voice and explained:

"To be honest... She's really into cute things. She adores them, loves them. But most tragically, her high intelligence has come to realize this—she is fatally unsuited to cute clothing or accessories. On occasion she may suddenly challenge the notion on a willful whim, but please pretend you didn't notice. At first I simply suggested to her to have the new secretary's assistant wear a uniform, but the result was—Indeed, as an act of desperation, she seems intent on making a certain someone dress cute in her stead, in order to project herself onto..."

"Superintendent."

A sudden voice came from the door connecting to the adjoining room. Jumping in fright, the superintendent turned his gaze over there, only to find Zenon poking her upper body out from behind the door, holding up a written resignation expressionlessly.

"Please enjoy the tea I've prepared before it gets cold. Should you wish to continue the topic of conversation, I shall completely and vigorously respect your freedom and wishes—But please forgive me for I must submit my resignation today—"

"I get it! Jeez, please forget everything irrelevant that was said! Hahaha! Zenon-kun, would you mind serving the tea, please?"

The superintendent responded as if trying to sweep the issue under the rug. Zenon put away the resignation letter and brought the tea into the room.

Following closely behind her was—

"E-Excuse me! I... Uh... Have brought the tea snacks for everyone?"

It was Sovereignty dressed in a maid uniform. Holding a tray with great unfamiliarity, her situation looked quite precarious as she took wobbling steps.

"I-I see now..."

Haruaki groaned. This was what the superintendent meant by settling the incident. As punishment for making students faint, Sovereignty had to provide physical labor from now on and become the subordinate of Zenon who kept complaining about a lack of manpower. Earlier in the morning at the school gates, Haruaki had run into Shiraho and Sovereignty who had been summoned to school. They had informed him of the matter, but Haruaki never imagined she would be working dressed like this.

"I know about this outfit! It's how maidservants dress! But based on my memory, there shouldn't be that many frills, right?"

"...I originally wanted to say, if Sovereignty is unwilling, I was going to make her take it off even if I need to resort to force. But troubling enough, Sovereignty actually seems to be strangely happy about it. Seriously, how did it come to this!?"

Fear and Shiraho offered their comments respectively.

"Uniform... Uniform eh? ...Oh well, I suppose it still counts as work clothes in a sense... Maybe?"

"—Do you have any objections to my subordinate's uniform, Yachi-san?"

"No! Absolutely none!"

Zenon cast an icy-cold gaze, prompting Haruaki to shake his head frantically. Whatever, if the person wearing it had no qualms about it, there was nothing wrong with it.

"Hey Haruaki, what are those ball-like objects on the tray? They look really tasty, no?"

"Hmm...? Those are cream puffs. Wow, these look really high-class."

"Some local souvenirs from the place of origin. I happen to know a great pastry chef."

Haruaki had forgotten about one important matter.

He had forgotten something he should have informed the superintendent.

Indeed, "Sovereignty" "working" "as the secretary's assistant"—every single one of these concepts held troubling elements.

A sudden scream verified these fears.

"Yawaaaaaaaaa!"

Sovereignty slipped and her entire body tumbled forwards. Although she managed to stabilize the tray and avoided overturning it, a cream puff slid off the tray. In order to maintain the tray's balance, Sovereignty landed on her face, unable to change her posture in time. As if guided by some strange turn of fate, the fallen cream puff lay waiting exactly at her landing spot, with the pastry acting to cushion the fall for her nose—

Gush.

Naturally, the cream puff was squashed while the cream inside squirted all over Sovereignty's face.

"Sniff sniff... Disgusting, it's all sticky..."

Sovereignty sat on her side and got up, blushing with embarrassment as viscous cream covered her face. Frantically, she seemed like she intended to wipe the cream away from her face first, but because her hands were still occupied by the tray, naturally her only recourse was—

"I'll just have to lick it off... Ah... Delicious..."

Haruaki rolled his eyes at the scene.

"Superintendent, I forgot to mention to you that this girl—is unimaginably air-headed. If one had to name someone who absolutely cannot be relied on for critical responsibilities, she'd be the number one candidate."

"...Looks like it."

The man in the gas mask shrugged as if he already accepted things as a done deal.



"By this point I can't ask her to quit. Anyway, bridges will be crossed when they come. Zenon-kun's appearance may suggest otherwise, but she's actually quite good at taking care of others."

As Haruaki watched, Zenon calmly walked over to Sovereignty's side and gently took the tray.

"Sovereignty-san, are you okay?"

"Ah yes... Oh, I-I'm sorry! I'm all flustered and in a clumsy panic, so—Oh no! This was meant for the guests but I made it fall and squashed it, and even licked it?"

"These cream puffs already included your portion from the very start, so dropping one or licking it is fine. Just clean it up afterwards. However—there is one thing I cannot overlook."

"W-What is it?"

Helping Sovereignty to her feet, Zenon stared at her with her usual super cool gaze. Sovereignty timidly shrank hunched her shoulders. What sort of reprimand would she receive? What kind of punishment lay in wait?

"Ah, sob sob... Sob sob sob... Umm, sorry..."

"No need to apologize. Don't move."

"Y-Yes... Sob sob sob..."

Zenon's severe glare flashed.

Then with unbelievable speed she reached out with her hand—

"—You forgot to wear a hair band."

"Yes?"

Plucking out a frilly hair band from somewhere, Zenon placed it on Sovereignty's head. Stepping back to admire her handiwork, Zenon proceeded to nod expressionlessly as usual.

"Truly perfect."

...In any case, the direct superior seemed rather satisfied with the air-headed maid.

Then the entire group had tea while Fear expressed amazement at the taste of cream puffs. Before they knew it, lunch was almost over and it was time to return to class. Just at this moment—

"By the way, Shiraho-kun, how do you feel about school?"

"—Nothing much, it's very ordinary. I really want to get home soon."

Just as she was about to leave the room, Shiraho halted her steps and turned her cold gaze towards the superintendent.

"Is that so? But that's basically what it's like for students. Anyway, skipping class is not allowed!"

"I got it, okay. This is punishment for causing student's to faint, right?"

"That's only one reason out of many—the main point is because your father wanted to you to return to normal life."

"...As if you'd know anything about that."

Shiraho's gaze could be described as no different from murderous intent. Nevertheless, the man in the gas mask simply shrugged in a relaxed manner.

"Perhaps I don't. Your father and I could not be said to be close friends. Even so—or rather, precisely because of that—I can tell that he cherished you greatly."

"I don't understand what you mean."

"Why would he drag his body here despite his ill health to deliver Sovereignty expressly? Was it really coincidence that he exhausted his strength for this undertaking? He should have known the risks involved. Although his reasons for doing it were unfortunately due to a misunderstanding... You should at least acknowledge that he pushed himself this far for your sake, right?"

"I only find him stupid."

"Really? I simply chat with him occasionally when I visit the shop, but never was there an occasion when he didn't chat to me about you, in his usual gruff tone of voice. Like 'that child has grown taller' or 'she told me to change the lightbulb' or stuff like that... All trivial things that would make me feel like laughing and ridiculing him: 'You even remember that kind of dialogue?'"

Shiraho silently bit her lower lip hard.

"By the way, let me tell you something important, because I think I might be the only one left who knows. That theatrical troupe you participated in before, your father must have gone to watch, right?"

"...Only the first time, that's all. After that, he never attended again. Hardly surprising, for that person never had any interest in me."

"Then you're wrong. After going back home, he angrily scolded his wife—in the words, your mother. 'Why make her do that kind of thing! She doesn't look happy at all! Let her go learn something she really enjoys doing!' Oh my, I heard that everyone would become mesmerized when they saw your acting skills... But then while your were performing with those acting skills, only one person saw your true expression. So, was that person really uninterested in you?"

"...!"

Shiraho's gaze wavered as she turned her back to the superintendent.

"He is simply awkward in expressing himself. In any case, I hope you take note of this."

"...Like I would know."

Her voice sounded weak, truly very weak.

Without looking back, she simply raised her hand:

"Sovereignty, let's go home together after school. I'll be waiting for you in the classroom."

Then she walked briskly out of the superintendent's office.

Haruaki and the rest, who were left behind, turned and looked at one another, struck with an unbelievable sense of solidarity.

Surely it was plain for anyone to see the reason why she hurried and left.

Part 2

Just as they left the superintendent's office, accompanied by Sovereignty who left the room to see them off, Sovereignty called Konoha back, saying she had something to tell her.

"Well then, we'll go back first. But don't you be too late."

Watching as Haruaki and Fear disappeared, Konoha turned to face Sovereignty.

"Umm, I'm sorry!"

"Eh?"

"Umm, I haven't had the chance to properly apologize to you until now..."

Sovereignty bowed her head and spoke with awkward shyness. Konoha smiled in return: "Don't let it weigh on your mind. I've already recovered."

She is truly benevolent to the core—Konoha thought to herself. The fainting incident happened because of circumstances that could not be helped, rather than out of malice. Although the act could not be described as commendable, at least there was no need to pursue the matter to seek redress.

"I have another doll friend who also drains life force sometimes. Perhaps one could say that 'life drain' is a doll's basic trait? An ability as natural and as potent as the concept that 'cursed blades are sharper' perhaps? So I'm all used to it already."

"B-But..."

"Don't worry. Compared to humans, we are more easily affected by mental aspects. Although I suffered greatly, conversely, I was able to recover my energy just by holding hands... Ah, that's right!"

Konoha puffed out her chest as if joking around.

"Perhaps because this incident has left me with some pleasant memories, if you ever confide your troubles in me, I will always help you! If you are ever compelled to drain feelings of love from others, please take mine! Just treat me to a lunchbox as compensation and it'll be fine."

Perhaps because Konoha's words succeeded in easing her conscience, Sovereignty resumed a cheerful expression.

Then mischievously she examined Konoha's face.

"You've been in love with someone all along?"

Konoha smiled and answered:

"Yes, all along—I will not lose to anyone. Starting from a long time ago."

Part 3

In the classroom, Shiraho kept staring outside from her seat beside the window.

As always, this space known as a classroom felt unpleasant, regardless whether it was during class or the lunch break. No one came to talk to her because she kept a stiff and displeased expression as she gazed out the window. Hence, even when the bell rang for the end of school, she continued staring out the window with complete indifference.

Sovereignty occupied her thoughts. To be honest, the maid uniform suited her quite well. It was very cute. Although Shiraho worried about the strange man in the gas mask, were he to engage in any sexual harassment, that secretary of his would surely protect Sovereignty competently. In any case, Shiraho was going to trust her for now and see how things would go.

Then she recalled—Her father. What the superintendent told her about him.

(By this point, even if I'm told he was simply awkward...) Shiraho sighed, or at least, that was what she thought she did. However— "Ah—!"

The girl sitting in front of her suddenly made a sound and looked back to gaze at Shiraho.

"...What's the matter?"

"Hmm... Oh, it's nothing much... It's just that the sight of you smiling, Sakuramairi-san, surprised me—"

"I smiled?"

I thought I was simply sighing? Involuntarily, she touched her face.

"Look, Haruna, I was right! She isn't actually like a doll. Although she's unbelievably pretty, I think she's just nervous! That's why I mustered my courage to talk to you, Sakuramairi-san, to see if I could help with anything! Uh

—was what was said this morning really true?"

This girl was asking about the teacher's explanation? After all, a reason was needed as to why 'Sakuramairi Shiraho' attended school for a few days, only to be replaced by a different person. The reason given by the superintendent was relayed to the class by the gloomy homeroom teacher.

"Yes. That person is a friend of mine who loves to play pranks. Starting today, she'll be working at the superintendent's office. Earlier she said she wanted to get to know the school atmosphere and so she decided on her own to pose as me."

"Wow~ That's really naughty of her. So that's what happened. She must have been worrying whether she would be found out, so that's why she seemed especially gloomy sometimes. If only I'd known she was someone so interesting, I would have talked to her more... Same for you, Sakuramairi-san, I should have talked to you sooner. I'm sorry, because you're too pretty, I've been feeling a bit intimidated until now."

"...You can say it straight. There's a wall between us. I'm not good at talking to others."

"Eh, i-is that so?"

The girl who struck up the conversation began to get nervous.

However, her myriad facial expressions and indecisive cheerfulness reminded Shiraho of a certain someone.

Her description of "isn't actually like a doll" roused certain memories in Shiraho, prompting her to recall a certain person who had been watching over her until recently, but she could never see him again.

Incredibly, Shiraho found her shoulders relaxing.

"However, I don't dislike people like you."

That was simply what she thought.

This classroom, and the past—

That classroom in the past, where everyone looked at her as if she were a doll, was perhaps different from this one.

That said—who knew if this was because Shiraho had undergone changes herself.

"Woohoo! If that's the case, then I will gladly claim the throne of being Sakuramairi-san's first friend! So, as your friend, let me ask you the most pressing question... Please answer simply yes or no, do you have a boyfriend?"

In any case, a lover existed, setting aside for now the question of whether the title boyfriend or girlfriend would be more appropriate.

"Yes."

The instant she replied—

All the people eavesdropping on Shiraho's conversation (mainly boys) went into an uproar.

Part 4

As if acting as a spokesperson for the hearts of all students, the bell rang inside the school building to signal the end of classes for the day.

Packing his belongings to return home, Haruaki found a student approaching Fear. This was the girl who finally came back to school after fainting due to Sovereignty.

After the incident ended, Haruaki and the rest had spread rumors about a cure: "It seems like the victims recovered faster if their crush visited them!" In a certain sense, it felt like a spell from someone somewhere.

Although they would not recover as swiftly as Konoha, refilling feelings of love was still quite effective. At least the rumors proved their worth as victims of the fainting incidents all returned to school successively.

"Fear-chan."

"Hmm? What is it?"

"Umm, I still haven't thanked you... But back when I fainted, you were the one who took me to the infirmary, right? So I must express my gratitude. Thank you very much. Sorry for the trouble."

"Oh... Not at all... It really wasn't much trouble."

"Nothing of that sort! Next time, let me treat you... I'm really looking forward to going to a teahouse together with you! Do you like sweet things, like parfaits for example?"

"I-I don't hate them! Umm, I don't have them very often—Compared to the rice crackers and tea combo, I have no idea which would be tastier. I am interested in finding out, very interested!"

"You like rice crackers and tea? That's quite old-fashioned for tastes... Ah, I get it."

For some reason, she threw a glance at Haruaki who had been eavesdropping on the conversation. He frantically turned his gaze away.

"Oho oho? So it turns out you're both very alike? That makes sense, for your likes to be similar. Hohoho..."

"What are you talking about?"

"Nothing, just muttering to myself. Anyway, thank you for last time! See you tomorrow!"

The girl smiled teasingly and waved as she exited the classroom. I hope she's not misunderstanding or something—Haruaki slumped his shoulders in dejection.

Fear swept her books and other belongings from the desk into her schoolbag, murmuring softly in a voice that only Haruaki could hear:

"...What happened to that girl was clearly the result of my failure, but she thanked me instead. Does those kinds of thanks help lift my curse? It feels sort of like cheating."

"You did send her to the infirmary and she is thanking you sincerely. What's wrong with that, why don't you accept it? Let me clarify first, what's important is not the words of thanks but the feelings in other people's hearts."

Fear seemed unconvinced. Can't be helped—Haruaki supplemented his point:

"I think you might not understand, so let me tell something. I think you worked really hard this time! Accepting the superintendent's request and then receiving that girl's thanks—Also, even though Shiraho didn't say anything, I'm sure she's grateful to you. Using the measurement scale I just designed, your help to others amounts roughly to 'Helping a hundred old ladies carry their luggage'!"

"...I don't get it."

Fear burst into laughter.

"But compared to helping a hundred old ladies, I think doing something like this once is a lot easier. I am not a tool suited for heavy labor and I don't need to ponder strange things."

"What the heck are you talking about again... If this kind of troublesome incident happens often, what kind of world would it be!? Even if you want to slack off, that's not acceptable. Go and learn how to do house chores properly, don't be lazy!"

"I-It's not like I said I wanted to slack off or be lazy! I'll do the chores, just you watch!"

Grumbling with displeasure, Fear packed and got ready to go home. Haruaki then followed. Suddenly, his gaze was drawn to Kirika who was outside the classroom.

(Why is Class Rep making such a scary expression...?)

Part 5

Carrying her notebook, Kirika was walking along the corridor in the staff block. Arriving before the mathematics staff room, her target happened to walk out from inside.

"Himura-sensei, I'm sorry to disturb you. There's a few things I don't understand in today's lesson..."

"Oh okay... No problem. Which parts did you not get...?"

The gloomy and introverted teacher asked timidly. After Kirika flipped open the notebook and pointed the questions out to him—

"Hmm—I see... These are rather difficult questions. Let's talk as we walk, shall we?"

"Yes."

Kirika chased after him as he walked nonchalantly into the materials reference room. Entering the room as well, Kirika shut the door behind her. Clearly he wanted to answer her questions in this location.

At this moment—Himura gazed at the notebook with a amusement and heckled:

"I see. 'Were you the one who released the doll?' A sharp question indeed."

"Keep your amazement to yourself and answer the question, Himura."

"Oh my, how scary. Although I really like your eyes, could you turn down the hostility? Researcher Ueno."

Unlike his usual timid attitude, Himura's face was filled with confidence, even to the point of arrogance.

Currently in this place, he was not the mathematics teacher.

Instead, he was someone who researched cursed tools—a member of the

organization researching Wathes, Lab Chief Yamimagari Pakuaki's Nation.

Ueno Kirika's partner, Himura Sunao.

"Why are you asking this kind of question?"

Obviously, because there was a need to confirm. Kirika normally avoided him as much as possible, which was why she initially tried to dissuade Haruaki and the rest from asking Shiraho's homeroom teacher for a look at the contact network. Class 7's homeroom happened to be this man. Particularly when Wathes were concerned, approaching him or letting Haruaki's group make contact with him would be unwise decisions.

Nevertheless, she felt compelled to ask him this once—

"It was only due to the convoluted series of events that they failed to notice, but as a third party observer listening to their story, I found this question so obvious that it was absolutely ridiculous. If Sovereignty had escaped the suitcase on her own, then the intact lock on the suitcase would be very strange indeed. After all, she does not possess any special skill for escaping. However, they only discovered the doll was missing after unlocking the case—With that, the implication was obvious, that someone had unlocked it from outside and then restored the lock to its original state."

"Oh? So what?"

Himura twisted his lips in delight. Is he toying with me?

"Immediately following that, the next point of suspicion that occurred to me was the Indulgence Disk. Sovereignty was deliberately vague back then, but she did mention that she heard about the Indulgence Disk from someone other than the man who inserted it into her body. Then who could have told her? In my opinion... You must have told her when you helped her escape, right?"

"Haha, although you lack evidence, your conclusions are correct, full marks! Because she was puzzled by why her curse sped up in progression, I explained it to her, kind as I am. I even told her as well: 'Places like schools are full of people harboring feelings of love!' —Naturally, this came from the kindness of my heart as well."

"Benevolence? Absolutely ridiculous. I am only speculating, but Sovereignty

would rather be destroyed than harm Shiraho. She deliberately refrained from resisting when captured because of suicidal thoughts. Yet you took this opportunity to entice her with a glimpse of remaining hope. Stated more directly, what you did was equivalent to telling her to drain students of their feelings of love!"

"Zero marks for this answer. She is the one who made the final decision. Out of the kindness of my heart, I simply released her from the suitcase, gave her some information and asked her to keep my involvement a secret."

The doll was innocent and trusting. Since it was true that this man rescued her, that was probably why she upheld the promise of secrecy. Or maybe—she was afraid of retribution for breaking the promise. Indeed, it would be a poor move since Sovereignty had someone she wanted to protect.

"Why did you have to do such a thing!?"

"Haha... You ask me why?"

"I"

Slam! Kirika was shoved against the wall by her shoulders. She glared at Himura who drew near right before her face. In combination with his expression of complete confidence, his gloomy long hair now served only to highlight his transformation into a gigolo's appearance.

"You should understand very well, partner? Our job as researchers is to 'study' Wathes. I am simply obeying orders. Indeed, from the very moment the Sovereignty Perfection Doll entered Japan, it was already a target for investigation. A prime investigation target like an antique shop can't possibly be missed out, right? I not only watched her but also listened to what she said, which is how I knew about the feelings of love etc."

"You... Installed an eavesdropping device?"

"Of course. Then—when the doll was delivered to the superintendent's office, I was assigned a research theme."

"What research theme?"

"Simply stated... 'How will Fear-in-Cube react to a hostile Wathe?' I originally

thought she would choose destructive means—but the end result exceeded my expectations in various ways, allowing me to collect a lot of interesting data."

"Tsk—For that kind of purpose...!"

Sovereignty and Shiraho were backed into a desperate corner?

One misstep and one of them would very like be dead now.

Kirika was just about to lose her temper when Himura's face pressed near.

"That kind of purpose? Painfully obvious, zero marks—As a member of the Lab Chief's nation, it goes without saying, doesn't it? Kirika, Ueno Kirika, the younger sister of His Excellency, our dear lab chief! Not everyone is free to do as they wish like you. That's right, you do realize that you are tolerated to do as you please only because of a certain someone, right? Someone who helps by tampering with your reports in various ways, turning a blind eye to various questionable activities, handling all sorts of mundane details for you? Yeah, that's me!"

"...!"

"Why would I help you in all these ways? I must have repeated myself so many times, your ear must be rotting off? Kirika, isn't it time you became mine?"

Himura touched Kirika's skirt with his hand. Kirika remained expressionless without putting up any resistance.

"I think it's time for you to give up. Listen carefully, Kirika, you are no ordinary woman. Beneath those clothes, you are wearing a bondage suit like a queen, a cursed prisoner's uniform that cannot be taken off for the remainder of your life. Who else would love you but me? To love a person like you, forever stuck in a black leather outfit?"

Lifting up the skirt, Himura glanced down. Expressionless, Kirika did not resist.

"Do you really think a man would cherish a woman who cannot engage in a fully naked embrace? I dare assert: you will never be able to pursue a romantic relationship like a normal person. Indeed, not even that guy whom you're so obsessed about, not even he can possibly accept your feelings—"

"Shut up immediately and take your hand away. Otherwise, only death awaits you."

A voice that seemed as if it froze the air.

Himura did as told and shut his mouth, raising both arms with a wry smile to indicate surrender.

Tightly wound around his neck was—the ominous black belt—the «Tragic Black River». Used in the same manner as the previous owner, it was constricting the flighty man's breathing.

"Cough... Hey, that's enough... I beg you, cough, huff, I'm really going to die..."

"..."

"Cough! Gah, ah, arghhh, cough cough..."

Before a freshly strangled corpse could be created, Himura was finally released.

Collapsed with his hands against the floor, he coughed and wheezed intensely as Kirika looked down at him dispassionately.

"Cough cough... Oww... Hah, went too far, huh... Haha..."

"..."

"Ha, never mind, I'm not in a rush anyway. Even in the future, your situation is not going to change. One day you will give up and become mine. I will wait until the day you despair, but before that, I don't mind you owing me favors for now—In fact, please feel free to continue increasing your debt."

Expressionlessly, Kirika picked up the notebook that had fallen by her feet. Turning back, she said:

"Then let me say this first, dismantle all eavesdropping devices in the Sakuramairi residence!"

"Because it invades privacy? How nice of you... Oh well, this bit of thing is trivial. Seeing as their situation has stabilized, there shouldn't be anything new of interest. I'll just have to satisfy the branch office with regular observation reports. But Kirika, you should understand very well, don't you? This is merely

hypocrisy."

As Kirika halted her steps, Himura made a sinister smile behind her.

"I don't care about the Sakuramairi home, but in regards to monitoring the important site, namely the Yachi residence, I will not back off no matter what— Unless Lab Chief Yamimagari issues a direct order. From the moment you decided to overlook this arrangement, you entrenched yourself unmistakably as a member of the Lab Chief's Nation, and unavoidably became my accomplice."

Kirika resumed walking again. Opening the door to the research materials room—

"A member of the Lab Chief's Nation? Accomplice? Absolutely ridiculous—If I needed a label, it would only be—"

As if telling it to herself, she spoke in a composed voice:

"The ordinary class rep of Year 1 Class 2, Himura-sensei."

Part 6

In the corridor, Fear and Haruaki were making their way towards the shoe lockers when they happened to find Sovereignty approaching from the opposite direction. Rushing madly without caring about the gaze of onlookers, she braked hard to a sudden stop only when she noticed Fear and Haruaki.

"Ahhhh. Good afternoon, are you two going home now~? ...Yaaah!"

Clang—A rather painful sounding noise was heard from the trash can. Unable to stop in time, she was now crouching on the ground, holding her shin as she trembled—What a familiar looking scene.

"Perhaps saying this is futile, but I'll still remind you again all the same—You need to act more composed."

After finding out about the details of how Sovereignty and Shiraho had exchanged identities, Fear originally thought her clumsiness stemmed from being unused to a human body—But how should one say this? In actual fact, this merely her true nature?

"R-Right again... I want to correct my flaw of being easily flustered."

Sovereignty rubbed her leg as she stood up. Fear watched her quizzically and said: "Putting that aside, why are you wearing a school uniform?"

"Oh, because I changed out of the maid outfit in the room next door to the superintendent's office. I'm allowed to wear casual clothes when coming and leaving school, but I think it's more fitting to wear this within school. Besides, wearing this makes Shiraho and me a matching pair."

"You promised to meet up, right? Do you know where the classroom is?"

Sovereignty smiled as if she found the question funny.

"I know it. After all, I did attend lessons for two days."

"Oh yeah, that's right. Looks like I worried too much... Then see you."

Haruaki resumed walking with an understanding expression. However, Fear suddenly thought of something to ask Sovereignty.

"Hey Haruaki, I've got something to talk to her about. Why don't you wait at the shoe lockers?"

"Hmm? What is it about?"

"N-None of your business! There's no reason to tell you. It's between girls only, so show some sensitivity!"

"Why are you getting angry at me? Whatever, I don't get you at all. Then don't take too long or else I'm going to leave you behind."

Seeing Haruaki walking out of sight from the corridor, Fear took a deep breath as if encouraging herself.

"What is it? Ah, I just thought of this, is it really okay to use 'between girls' to describe me? Though indeed, I am in female form right now."

"D-Don't mind little details like that! I have something to ask you."

"Something to ask me?"

Fear behaved shyly and awkwardly until she finally spoke: "...I've learned a new concept... That's the feeling I get. This is all thanks to you."

"Mmhm."

"So I have something I want to confirm. Perhaps it's fine even if I don't know but somehow it keeps bothering me, so please give me an answer."

"Mmhm."

Fear paused again and bowed her head, hesitating for a few seconds.

Then she looked up again—

Displaying a gaze that seemed slightly fearful yet hopeful—

"Currently, you... Are you able to, from me... Drain that?"

"From you?"

"...Yeah. I'm not asking you to actually do it, but I want to know if you are able to drain it."

"In other words, you want to confirm 'Does it exist in your heart?' Is that it?"

Understanding Fear's intention, Sovereignty nodded emphatically and stared at her body. Fear clutched her skirt tightly as she waited for the answer.

After a while.

"Well... The conclusion is—"

"W-What's the conclusion?"

Sovereignty smiled even more cheerfully and said:

"Maybe, maybe not."

"What? Isn't that meaningless? I really wanted to know the answer!"

"Perhaps I will know if I touch your body, Fear-chan, but I don't want to do that."

Fear frowned:

"...Meaning that you don't want to tell me?"

"That's not really the same. I am wondering whether I should be the one to tell you. Because it is more valuable if you realize it yourself, only then can you cherish it forever. I suggest you wait until you can be sure."

"Is that so...?"

"As an expert, if I had to say it—Indeed, that is so."

Sovereignty continued half-jokingly:

"So which result do you hope for yourself, Fear-chan? To have or not to have? You wanted to confirm because you're bothered by it but you don't know what it is, right?"

Fear never thought this far ahead. Instantly, she blushed.

"You... Asking me what I hope... Umm—I simply wanted to check! No idea, I don't know! Whether it exists or not doesn't matter, if I don't know then fine! Mmmm... E-End of conversation! You, hurry and forget it ever happened!"

"But you just said it's bothering you. Ahaha, looks like you have a long road ahead of you."

Faced with Fear's vigorous indignation, Sovereignty deliberately smiled with a shrug then started on her way as she waved.

"This might be necessary in the future, so I'll give you some honest advice— Perhaps the lengths of time might be different, but time is not the deciding factor. I will cheer for the two of you, so please try your best openly! That's all for now... See you~"

"...The two of us?"

Fear tilted her head and puzzled over the meaning of Sovereignty's words.

Afterword

I am truly grateful for this chance to meet everyone again. This is Minase Hazuki, presenting to you, dear reader, «C³ - C-Cubed II».

In the first volume, I think I was quite lucky to be in the position of receiving many comments from readers: "I like Fear!" "I like Konoha!" "I like Class Rep!"...etc. A vast selection of love calls(?) for various characters. It makes me really happy. And in this second volume, a few new characters have made their appearance, summarized by trait as weirdo *beautiful boobs* fair boobs / secretary boobs... Secretary boobs?

As for the plot in this volume (readers who read the book should already know), the developments revolve around a certain doll. However, it pretty much follows the first volume's formula of moe, ecchi and mild guro, henceforth abbreviated as "mo-e-guro" (coined by Narita Ryougo-san). I suppose future installments will continue the trend, with only minor variations in the proportions. Hopefully, readers will continue staying for the ride.

Then again, I suddenly realized something. If all goes well, this volume should be released in January—So let me wish everyone a happy new year! Hoho! Have I squeezed myself amongst the ranks of those in Japan by offering this greeting far ahead of all the others? ...To be honest, this afterword was written back in October when the new year spirit had yet to show any signs!

Anyway in 2007, I was able to publish three books (+ a new draft for Dengeki hp) so this counts as a personal record for me. Compared to my peers in the industry, however, I guess my speed is ordinary or even relatively slow. This year, my goal is to publish four in one year... I want four books... I will work hard towards this goal.

As usual, this volume also received plenty of care from many people. There's the editor in charge, Kawamoto-sama, who made the final decisions after having heated arguments over this scene and that. Sorry for my ignorance and causing so much trouble for you... P-Please don't abandon me!

Continuing from Volume 1, we have Q-sama drawing beautiful illustrations with Fear becoming increasingly adorable and the new characters whose charms exceeded my expectations. Nothing fascinates me more than this. Thank you and I hope to continue receiving your guidance!

Of course, I'm also very thankful to the proofreaders and designers, as well as those involved with MW.

Finally, there are all the readers who follow this story—not only do I thank you, I also love you all to death! Let me offer my bountiful love! This love's vast volume knows no bounds...!

Well then, Volume 2 concludes here. Let us meet again in the third installment!

Minase Hazuki

Translator's Notes and References

1. ↑ A reference to the famous American director, Stanley Kubrick.[1]
2. ↑ **Pre-established harmony**: a reference to Leibniz's *Monadology* which theorizes that all substances (including minds and bodies) casually interact with one another because God programmed harmony in advance.[2]
3. ↑ **Wooden cylinders**: probably a reference to the *koteka*. [3]
4. ↑ **Johnny's**: A reference to Johnny & Associates, a Japanese talent agency famous for training and promoting groups of male idols.[4]
5. ↑ **Alphabetical order**: actually the 五十音(*gojūon*), literally "Fifty Sounds," the ordering of Japanese kana (hiragana/katakana). Named for the 5x10 grid used to display the characters. Technically, there are 46 syllables in modern Japanese because there are 5 gaps in the grid and 1 extra character.[5]
6. ↑ **Bilboquet**: the *kendama*(剣玉) is a traditional Japanese toy similar to the classic cup-and-ball game.[6]
7. ↑ **Hermaphroditus**: a minor Greek deity of bisexuality and effeminacy. Depicted in art as a female figure with male genitals.[7]